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HEZBOLLAH

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HEZBOLLAH

A Short History

Updated and Expanded Third Edition

Augustus Richard Norton

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS

PRINCETON AND OXFORD

Copyright © 2018 by Princeton University Press Published by Princeton University Press 41 William
Street, Princeton, New Jersey 08540

**6 Oxford Street, Woodstock, Oxfordshire
OX20 1TR**

press.princeton.edu

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Library of Congress Control Number 2018931062

ISBN 978-0-691-18088-5

British Library Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available This book has been composed in
Garamond Premier Pro and ITC Avant Garde Std Printed on acid-free paper.∞

Printed in the United States of America 1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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Prologue to the Third Edition

My work on the Shi‘i community began in tumultuous times many years ago. The Shah of Iran had been toppled, Iraq was about to invade Iran (launching a savage eight-year war), and Lebanon, in the midst of civil war and ever permeable to external influence, was divided into militia fiefdoms supported by regional and global rivals. Next door in Syria, the legitimacy of the al-Asad regime was being challenged by Islamist opponents who would soon be pitilessly obliterated along with much of the city of Hama in 1981. The most significant nonstate actor in the Arab world was the Palestine Liberation Organization, then dismissed by Israel as “terrorist.” Shi‘i Hezbollah did not yet exist (its establishment is discussed in [chapter 2](#)).

In the four decades that have passed since my interest in Lebanon began, the country has enjoyed peaceful, prosperous interludes, and some Lebanese have managed to insulate themselves from disorder and violence or lose themselves in the rampant consumerism of Beirut. Others have made new lives as expatriates. It is sobering to consider how often invasion, warfare, dislocation, or the threats of impending disaster have impinged on daily life in Lebanon. Too many of the people whom I first encountered in the early 1980s or later have died violently: three were assassinated; others fell in battle or were otherwise victims of violence. As this updated version of *Hezbollah* goes to press, a seven-year civil war in Syria is entering a new phase—in which the government is attempting to restore its authority over a shattered country, in which more than half of the population has been internally displaced or fled as refugees. Hezbollah, the focus of this book, played a major role in defeating rebel forces and enabling the government’s survival. Meantime, ominous storm clouds hang over Lebanon, where bad weather hardly stops at the border.

Hezbollah emerged in the early 1980s following the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982. A variety of militant Shi‘i factions, inspired by the 1978–

79 Islamic Revolution in Iran and actively supported by Iran, competed for support. It would take a couple of years for Hezbollah to coalesce as an organization and to subsume many of its competitors. Hezbollah declared its commitment to replicating Iran's revolution in Lebanon, but this was hardly a widely shared view. Nor was Hezbollah the dominant Shi'i group of the 1980s. That distinction belonged to the reformist and popular Amal movement, which was seeking a seat at the political table in Beirut, while Hezbollah, at that time, rejected participating in the political system at all.

Even before Hezbollah was formally constituted, several of its most infamous members, working in league with Iran, carried out extraordinary attacks in Lebanon, including October 1983 truck bombings against U.S. marine and French paratrooper bases in Beirut, resulting in the death of over 300 people, including 241 U.S. service members and 58 French soldiers (see [chapter 4](#)). Hezbollah also gained worldwide notoriety for its leading role in holding foreigners hostage in the 1980s and early 1990s. Some hostages were held for years under savage conditions, and others—including CIA station chief William Buckley and marine Lieutenant Colonel Richard Higgins—died in captivity after merciless beatings and torture. These, and a variety of other violent acts, earned Hezbollah the enduring enmity of many Western officials.

In another realm, however, Hezbollah developed a reputation for professionalism and competence for its role in attacking the occupying Israeli military and its Lebanese proxy forces. Rather than withdrawing from Lebanon following its 1982 invasion, Israel retained control of about ten percent of Lebanese territory abutting its border. Hezbollah was by no means the only group resisting the occupation, but as time passed it established itself as the most lethal and effective group. Arguably, Israel's eventual exit from Lebanon in 2000 would not have occurred without the pressure posed by Hezbollah.

By the late 1980s, Hezbollah was directly confronting the more moderate Amal movement. While Amal has maintained a base of support in the Shi'i community, Hezbollah succeeded in supplanting it in the environs of Beirut, particularly in the populous Shi'i suburbs south of the city. Equally significant, Hezbollah was institutionalizing itself as a political party and earning a reputation for competence and honesty. In contrast, Amal often functioned more as a top-down patronage network. As a result,

many former supporters of Amal shifted their support to Hezbollah. Less than a decade following its creation, Hezbollah became the dominant group in Lebanon's Shi'i community.

Hezbollah was evolving from an Iranian-sponsored extremist group that rejected participation in Lebanese politics to a party with considerable autonomy and a talent for playing politics and winning elections. It became a Shi'i political party with a large base of popular support, and, contradicting its early stance, even became part of the Lebanese government. Simultaneously, it is Lebanon's most powerful military force. And it has not been beneath flaunting that power to get its way. ([Chapter 5](#) describes and analyzes the organization's evolution and its complex profile on the Lebanese political landscape.)

Especially since the intense 2006 war with Israel (the focus of [chapter 6](#)), an overwhelming majority of the Shi'a has embraced Hezbollah as the defender of their community. Hezbollah's security narrative, if not its worldview, suddenly became compelling, not simply for ardent Hezbollahis but even for many apolitical and avowedly secular Shi'i Muslims. The plausibility of Hezbollah's security narrative—that the Shi'a must protect themselves because the Lebanese Army is incapable of doing so and no one else will—is a crucial explanation for the uncommon unity one finds among many Shi'a Muslims today. This suggests that outsiders such as the United States or France seeking to reduce Hezbollah's influence in Lebanon must redress the security narrative rather than take steps that validate it. However legitimate Israel's concerns may be about Hezbollah's military capacity and its armory, not to mention its deep-seated hatred toward Israel, it is foolhardy to consider Hezbollah's strength without acknowledging how widely and how often the Lebanese, and especially Shi'i Lebanese, have suffered from Israel's disproportionate violence.

Hezbollah proved to have a tin ear when it came to politics in Syria. Its initial response to the so-called Arab Spring was calm and self-assured. When Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak was toppled in February 2011, many Hezbollah supporters were gleeful that an arch foe, who had lent strong support to the Shi'i group's Lebanese rivals, had fallen from power. As for Iran, leading regime figures incredulously claimed that the Islamic Revolution had inspired the Egyptian protestors. In fact, the Iranian regime was widely viewed in Arab countries as both repressive and alien.

Hezbollah was little concerned that the group's close ally in Damascus would be threatened at all. It turned out that Hezbollah shared in the Syrian government's self-delusions. Al-Asad's armed forces not only failed to suppress its internal opposition but also precipitated a civil war that imposed destitution, death, and destruction on its own citizens. By 2017, over 400,000 people had been killed in the war, many of them civilians and most at the hands of the government.

Inspired by the initial successes of the uprisings that erupted in Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, and Yemen, Syrians mounted peaceful demonstrations beginning in March 2011. The Damascus regime responded ruthlessly. Of course, the iron fist response failed to squash the protests, and as the opposition turned to bullets and bombs, floods of refugees began to cross borders into neighboring countries, including in Lebanon, where well over a million refugees sought safety by 2016. Considering that citizens represent just over four million people, the refugee influx has been calamitous for the small country's stability and treasury. The World Bank estimated in 2017 that the Syrian civil war and refugee challenge costs Lebanon about \$7.5 billion annually.

Many Lebanese would naturally prefer to keep these regional catastrophes at arm's length, praying that what happens in Syria, in particular, stays in Syria. Notwithstanding the efforts of leading Lebanese political figures to avoid entanglement in Syria and maintain a neutral stance of disassociation, the creeping encroachment of the Syrian civil war proved to be unstoppable. The two countries are intertwined economically, culturally, and politically. Well before Hezbollah's high-profile intervention in Syria bolstered the regime in the spring of 2013, hopes of neutrality faded amid cross-border shoot-outs, ambushes, kidnappings, floods of Syrian refugees entering Lebanon, and the counterflow of Lebanese to join the fight in Syria.

My impression, which is shared by a number of other close observers, is that the Lebanese are split about half-and-half concerning which side they support in Syria. Three decades of Syrian domination of Lebanon ended only in 2005, and many who suffered would celebrate the fall of the al-Asad regime. It must be said, however, that large numbers of Lebanese, including many Christians as well as Muslims, continue to see the Syrian regime in a favorable light, considering the alternative. They note that it has protected

minorities, and they fear the prospect of a new regime in which extreme jihadist groups would pose a lethal threat to those who do not embrace a Salafist interpretation of Islam.

The survival of the Syrian regime was a strategic imperative for Hezbollah, which feared the rise of a hostile government dominated by jihadists who would jeopardize the group's weapons flow and probably align with Saudi Arabia. Iran, of course, came to similar conclusions. It is debatable whether Hezbollah's intervention was simply at the behest of Iran, because the logic of Hezbollah's calculations was independently compelling. Hezbollah's decision to side openly with the Damascus regime in the fighting provoked an angry response from Salafist Sunni preachers in Lebanon who declared a jihad in Syria and rallied supporters to strike back at Hezbollah. Syrian opposition forces vowed to bring their war to Lebanon, and they did so with massive car bombs and artillery salvos on Hezbollah's urban stronghold in southern Beirut. As the war progressed, areas populated by Shi'a were festooned with posters of martyrs who had fallen in Syria.

Hezbollah's intervention—combined with the role of Iran and a variety of militias manned by Iraqi, Afghan, Pakistani and other Shi'a, and the addition of Russian air power, artillery and battlefield coordination—insured the survival of the Syrian regime. But the civil war will have no neat conclusion. Rebel groups survive in some of the provinces, while U.S.-supported Kurdish and Arab forces have enjoyed success in the campaign against ISIS held cities and towns. Turkey, intensely concerned with Syrian Kurds and their ambitions for autonomy, which Ankara opposes, and with continuing links to residual rebel groups, will have in hand in determining the outcome. In this context, it will be hard for Hezbollah to disentangle itself from Syria, even though the strategic outcome of the civil war is obvious.

Indeed, as noted in the conclusion, with the end of heavy combat in Syria, Lebanon is likely to enter a period of dangerous instability. Saudi-Iranian jousting was already a main event in Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia has signaled its intention of checking Iranian influence in Lebanon and undermining Hezbollah. The Saudis see the group playing a major role bolstering Iran's position in Iraq. Hezbollah members played a major role in training Iraqi militiamen, including in the use of lethal explosives against U.S. forces up until 2011. More recently, the Saudis accuse Iran and

Hezbollah of helping Yemeni Houthis, who have defied Saudi-led efforts to defeat them, despite a brutal three-yearlong military campaign. By late 2017, the Saudis pressured the Lebanese Sunni prime minister to resign from office to delegitimize the Lebanese government, called on its citizens to leave Lebanon (a step followed by Bahrain and Kuwait), and threatened punitive economic steps. These steps are probably a sampling of others to come. It is unclear where the U.S. stands on these measures, although President Donald Trump has been broadly supportive of Saudi Arabia.

Equally significant and worrisome for the group's partisans is Hezbollah's loss of popular esteem in the Arab world (addressed in [chapter 7](#)). In contrast to high-flying days following the 2006 war, when Hezbollah's virtues and battlefield exploits were widely celebrated, the group is now commonly derided around the Arab world and in the ubiquitous Saudi-funded media for its connections to the reviled theocracy in Iran, its implication in the assassination of former prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri in 2005, and for its alleged involvement in terrorist attacks. The decision of the European Union in 2013 to designate Hezbollah's military wing as a terrorist group added to the ostracism, which increased further when Hezbollah was denounced as a terrorist group by the Gulf Cooperation Council and most members of the Arab League.

Hezbollah is a formidable entity with deep support in Lebanon among a vast majority of the Shi'i community, as well as many Lebanese Christians. It has proven to be a resolute and competent military force and a highly institutionalized party. It has spread an ethos that is deeply resonant among many of its followers and it boasts robust support from Iran, for which it is a showcase success story. Even so, its foes are many, including those provoked by Hezbollah's support and training for opponents in places like Iraq. Its strong hand in Lebanon provokes its opponents to try to chop it down to size. In the process, efforts to limit Hezbollah's influence and confront Iran's geopolitical gains are likely to threaten the stability of precarious countries such as Lebanon. Without doubt, Hezbollah has affected the recent history of the Arab world, and the story is hardly over.



MAP 1 Major cities, and some important towns and villages, as well as Lebanon's six provinces and the areas of deployment of United Nations peacekeepers.

Prologue

We are gathered on the spacious balcony of an al-Bazuriya home on an easy summer evening in August 2004. Grapes, begging for picking, hang overhead on a thick fabric of vines, shading a long table brimming with Lebanon's famous *mezze* (appetizers)—tabbouleh, hummus, pickles in pastel shades, grape leaves wrapped in finger shapes stuffed with rice and herbs, milk-white cheese, breads, and other delicacies of vivid red, brown, and orange hues. The *mezze* and the meats, fish, and chicken that follow are to celebrate the visit of a son of the village of al-Bazuriya, a successful surgeon, and his bride, from Michigan. Many of the people around the table—parents, siblings, cousins, and friends—move easily between Arabic and English, especially and most helpfully when this author loses his way in Arabic. English has been the preferred second language in almost every Lebanese Shi'i family for decades.

The Shi'i Muslim village lies about five miles southeast of Tyre, Lebanon's southernmost city, and the border with Israel is eight miles due south. Al-Bazuriya boasts a few simple shops and a couple of hundred homes of stone or cinder block. This is a successful middle-class Shi'i family, for which, like many others in Lebanon, education and emigration are the steps on a ladder to a good life. In other families and villages, the destinations vary—Abidjan instead of Dearborn, Michigan; Ivory Coast instead of Brazil—but the pattern is the same. The Lebanese emigrants, whether their path of migration is circular, as with those who work in Africa as merchants and traders and return to Lebanon to marry and invest their earnings, or goes in one direction, as with those who end up in the Americas, typically sharing the largess they accumulate abroad with their extended families back home. These remittances are vital to their families. By one credible estimate, the annual remittances of all Lebanese abroad totaled nearly \$2.5 billion in 2001 (Hourani 2006, 27).

Over dessert and, later, small glasses of sweet hot tea, the conversation drifts from the cozy trivialities of family intimacy to serious talk about the politics of Lebanon now that the South is “liberated.” A little more than four years before this gathering, in May 2000, Israel withdrew its occupation army from southern Lebanon under pressure from Lebanese fighters, especially the self-styled “Islamic Resistance” led by the Shi‘i Muslim Hezbollah (the “Party of God”). Mention of the two-decade-long Israeli occupation of their country and the retreat of the occupiers still inspires pride and a joyful *ilhamdilillah* or *nushkur allah* (“praise to God” or “thank God”) within this circle of family and friends. Like many Lebanese, this family, in the course of the 1990s, had come to believe that the Israelis might never leave.

These sons and daughters of Bazuriya wanted me to know that theirs was the village where Hasan Nasrallah, now the leader of Hezbollah, grew up and went to school. One of his teachers, who was present at the family gathering, recalled young Hasan’s serious cast of mind and his piety even as an adolescent. Like many religious-minded young Lebanese Shi‘i men before him, Nasrallah went to study in the famous Shi‘i seminaries of Iraq’s al-Najaf, one of the great shrine cities of Shi‘ism. Nasrallah became secretary-general of Hezbollah in 1992, and ever since has been detested by Israel and America but widely admired in much of the Muslim world.

It was in al-Najaf as well as Karbala that key episodes in Shi‘ism occurred, and multitudes of Shi‘a visit annually to pray there alongside the tombs of two of Shi‘ism’s epic figures. For Shi‘i Muslims, such as the young Nasrallah, the language, food, and hospitality of al-Najaf and Karbala were familiar. In contrast, the seminaries of Iran were further removed culturally, linguistically, and physically. Still, these days it is just as likely that scores of young Lebanese men will journey to Iran for their religious instruction rather than to Iraq. This is not so much because of a sudden new affinity for Iran, but because Iraq, under Saddam Hussein, became a menacing place for Shi‘i students. Also, the country has been dangerous and chaotic since the Anglo-American invasion in March 2003. In any case, the Iranians offer an attractive stipend to entice young Shi‘a to their seminaries. One of the cousins, in fact, who was present that evening in Bazuriya in 2004 was a pleasant young seminary student home for the summer from Qum in Iran. He was intent on welcoming a non-Arab visitor

from America and eager to engage me in conversation, especially on the topic of his computer classes in Qum and the relative merits of Microsoft computer software.

In Bazuriya and villages across southern Lebanon, as in Shi'i locales in and around Beirut and in the Beqaa valley, political affinities and loyalties are multilayered and constantly shifting. Although the parties on the secular left have lost their appeal for most of the Shi'a, the secularist Communist Party of Lebanon, with its emphasis on social and economic equity, retains pockets of fervent support. Some villages are renowned for the continuing grip of leftist ideologies. Farther to the east, the village of Kafr Rumann, for instance, is jokingly called "Kafr Moscow" by its neighbors. Traditional land-owning elites, who have held sway over their clients for nearly a century, retain pockets of support, especially when they are understood to have changed with the times and have cultivated reputations for fair dealing and honesty. But the two major political players are now Amal, the reformist movement described in detail in [chapter 1](#), and Hezbollah, the militant party introduced in [chapter 2](#). Accurate membership figures are hard to find, but Amal, now more of an extensive patronage network than an institutionalized political party, clearly retains widespread support, especially in southern Lebanon.

In fact, just down the street from the balcony dinner a large billboard commemorates ten Amal martyrs from Bazuriya who died fighting Israel. In contrast to Amal, Hezbollah enjoys broad-based support in all three areas where the Shi'i Muslims predominate in Lebanon, namely, in the South, in Beirut and vicinity, and in the northern Beqaa valley and Hirmil region. Both parties draw heavily on the rich history of Shi'i Islam, especially the sect's famous martyrs and, in particular, Imam Hussein, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad. This history is recounted in [chapter 3](#).

Following the attack on the U.S. marine barracks in Beirut in 1983, Hezbollah has been associated with violence and terrorism in the minds of informed Americans. [Chapter 4](#) addresses the broad question of violence with regard to Hezbollah and the implication that Hezbollah is a terrorist organization.

Since the early 1980s, Hezbollah has evolved from an Iranian-influenced conspiratorial terrorist group rejecting participation in Lebanese politics to a party with considerable autonomy and a talent for playing

politics and winning elections. The Shi'i party is now part of the Lebanese government but simultaneously adopts an opposition demeanor, with a Janus-faced profile that infuriates detractors while seeming perfectly reasonable to its defenders and supporters. [Chapter 5](#) describes and analyzes the organization's evolution and its complex profile on the Lebanese political landscape.

The pleasant summer evening described above marked an all-too-short period of calm in Lebanon's history. Just a few weeks later, Syria, Hezbollah's ally and the power broker in Lebanon, would force the extension in office of an unpopular president and trigger momentous developments in Lebanon and internationally. In the coming months a famous former prime minister would be blown to pieces by a bomb that also killed twenty-two of his colleagues. In March 2005 nearly a million and a half people rose up in two massive demonstrations in Beirut streets, one condemning Syria for its likely role in the assassination and the other praising Syria for its involvement in Lebanon.

In July 2006, Hezbollah launched an operation to capture two Israeli soldiers in Israel, thus provoking an Israeli invasion that would leave much of Hezbollah's constituency homeless and more than a thousand predominantly Shi'i Muslim Lebanese dead in a war the Lebanese call Harb Tammuz ("the July war"). Hezbollah evidently had miscalculated, never anticipating Israel's furious onslaught. Although neither Israel nor Hezbollah were unequivocal victors, the war solidified Hezbollah's role as both a political player in Lebanon and a regional exemplar for other opposition-minded Muslims. How and why the war broke out when it did—following six years of relative calm on the Israeli-Lebanese border after the withdrawal of Israeli forces from southern Lebanon in 2000—is the subject of [chapter 6](#).

Internal pressure on Hezbollah, once awash in praise and adulation for its leading role in forcing Israel's 2000 exit from Lebanon, now mounted to disarm its militia. France and the United States, working in rare unison under UN Security Council Resolution 1701, would support the fledgling Lebanese government and pressure Hezbollah to disarm. How the unexpected war of 2006, and its aftermath, will affect the course of Middle East history is still unclear, but the war certainly brought Hezbollah to the fore as a key influence on the region's political landscape. Hezbollah is not

easily understood, either by simplistic stereotypes that typically inform depictions of the organization in the newspapers and on the airwaves of the Western world, nor by black and white worldviews. The purpose of this book is to offer a more balanced and nuanced account of this complex organization.

HEZBOLLAH



Billboard in southern Lebanon depicting Musa al-Sadr, the seminal Shi'i leader who disappeared in 1978; and Hasan Nasrallah, the Secretary-General of Hezbollah since 1992. Copyright © A. R. Norton, 2006.

Chapter 1

Origins and Prehistory of Hezbollah

The modern state of Lebanon won its independence from France in 1943. The defining compromise of Lebanese politics was the *mithaq al-watani* or national pact, an unwritten understanding between the dominant political communities of the day—the Sunni Muslims and the Maronite Christians—that would provide the terms of reference for Lebanon’s independence. In the 1920s the French, exploiting their League of Nations mandates in Lebanon and Syria, carved out generous chunks of Syria to create a viable “Greater Lebanon,” thereby thwarting the Arab nationalist dream of an independent state in Damascus. For the Sunnis, the acceptance of an independent state ended the hope of reuniting Lebanon with Syria. Although the Sunnis, many of them merchants, dominated the new republic’s coastal cities, their history was in the Syrian capital of Damascus. The Maronites, long the favored ally of French power and influence in the region, now had to concede that Lebanon was not an appendage of Europe but instead an Arab state. Neither Sunnis nor Christians spoke with a single voice, however, and dissent flourished.

The political system that emerged from the national pact was formalized into a system of sectarian communities, or confessions. Each of the country’s recognized sects was accorded political privilege—including senior appointments in the bureaucracy, membership in parliament, and positions in high political office—roughly proportionate to the community’s size.¹ This process was always rather inexact except for the highest political positions, which were awarded to the Maronites, Sunnis, and Shi’a. Thus, the Maronites, considered the plurality, were accorded the presidency, which carried preeminent prerogatives and powers, and the second largest community, the Sunnis, won the premiership, decidedly second fiddle to the presidency. The Shi’i community, third largest, was awarded the speakership of the parliament, a position with far weaker constitutional

powers than either the presidency or the premiership. The provenance of this allocation of power was a 1932 census of dubious reliability and, in fact, the last official census ever conducted in Lebanon. The data were sound estimates at best. The imbalance of power between the “three presidents” was rectified significantly by political reforms in 1989 in an agreement that provided the framework for ending the civil war of 1975–1990, which claimed about 150,000 lives.

The Shi‘i community, in any case, could yield little influence over the political system at the time, as it was impoverished and underdeveloped (Norton 1987, 16–23). A small community of Shi‘a lived in and around Beirut, but the overwhelming mass lived in southern Lebanon and in the northern Beqaa valley. Of course, the historical context for the impoverishment of all the Arab Shi‘i communities (found, notably, in Bahrain, Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia) derives from the fact that the dominant Arab Sunnis often despised the Shi‘a for deviating from the path of Sunni Islam. Over the course of the Ottoman Empire, which ruled Lebanon and Syria more or less effectively for more than four hundred years, the Shi‘a were suspected of being a stalking horse for Persia, notwithstanding the venerable origins of Arab Shi‘ism, which, in fact, long predates the introduction of Shi‘ism in Persia in the sixteenth century. Indeed, the central contention between Shi‘i and Sunni Muslims to this day goes back to the validity of the claim made by the partisans of ‘Ali, the husband of the Prophet Muhammad’s daughter, Fatimah, that he should succeed Muhammad upon the prophet’s death.

A conjuncture of social facts, regional conflicts, and domestic policies shaped the politicization of the Lebanese Shi‘a in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. The rate of this community’s natural increase outpaced all others in Lebanon, as the average Shi‘i family had nine members in the early 1970s, whereas the average Christian household had only six. Although fertility among Sunni women was also higher than among the Christians, Shi‘i women bore an average of one more child than their fellow Muslims (Chamie 1981, 44). Families of a dozen or more children are not uncommon among the Shi‘a, and as mobility improved in the first decades of Lebanese independence, tens of thousands migrated from the hinterlands to Beirut and abroad.

The hardscrabble Shi'i farmers cultivated the hills and valleys of the South and the Beqaa plateau, but most could not subsist on what they earned selling tobacco to the state monopoly or growing vegetables and fruits. Even those who owned land rather than working as sharecroppers often struggled to eke out a living from farming. The state was of little help, providing piddling sums for rural development, a pattern that persists. In the northern Beqaa and the Hirmil region, where the influence of the state was especially weak, poppies and hashish became valuable cash crops. In many Shi'i villages, several generations of young men left Lebanon to find their fortunes in Ivory Coast, Nigeria, Senegal, and throughout Africa, as well as in Latin America and the Arab oil-producing states of the Gulf. Later, these migrant workers would return to Lebanon, sometimes with impressive sums of money, and usually with little affection for the traditionally powerful families that dominated Shi'i society from Ottoman times.

In the South, the Shi'i heartland, the influx of one hundred thousand Palestinians beginning with the 1948–49 Palestine war introduced a pool of cheap labor, people willing to work for less than were Shi'i farm laborers, adding further impetus to migration. Later, of course, following the civil war in Jordan in 1970–71, thousands of armed Palestinian guerrillas would move to Lebanon, where the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) would challenge the authority of the Beirut government and establish a virtual state-within-a-state encompassing west Beirut and much of southern Lebanon.

Against this background, the Lebanese Shi'i Muslims mobilized their political efforts. For nearly half a century, the transformation of this community from quiescence to activism has brought into question the durability of Lebanon's founding compromise and substantially contributed to the violent turmoil that enveloped the country in the 1970s and 1980s.

The Rise of Shi'i Politics from the Mid-twentieth Century to the Lebanese Civil War

Political bosses (*zu'ama*) from a handful of powerful families dominated Shi'i politics into the 1960s and maintained their control through extensive patronage networks. The authority of the *zu'ama* depended on their clients' support, but by the 1960s many young Shi'i men and women became

alienated from old-style politics and were attracted by new political forces. The promise of radical change could only have been irresistible to a community whose ethos emphasized its exploitation and dispossession by the ruling elites. In Lebanon, as in Iraq, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait, Shi'a in large numbers were attracted in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s to secular opposition parties. In Lebanon the opposition took the form of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, the Lebanese Communist Party, the Organization for Communist Labor Action, and pro-Syrian and pro-Iraqi factions of the Arab Socialist Ba'th (or "Resurrection") Party. Particularly in the case of the Communist organizations and the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, there was an inherent ideological attraction to parties that condemned the tribal, religious, or ethnic bases of discrimination. Notably, the leadership of these secular parties was predominantly Christian. Although support for secular parties has dwindled, significant numbers of politicized Shi'a continue to express a preference for them, usually in particular families, villages, or regions. For instance, the Communists remain strong in the large village of Bra'sheet in the South, in an area now otherwise dominated by Hezbollah (literally, the Party of God), and the Amal movement, an acronym for Lebanese Resistance Detachments, often rendered as "Hope." Amal, and especially Hezbollah, were relative latecomers on the political scene and appealed to the Shi'a in clearly sectarian terms, despite their avowals of welcoming all comers.

Four major (and sometimes intertwined) trends distinguished the political mobilization of the Shi'a after the 1960s: secularism; liberation—especially the view that the fate of the deprived Shi'a was linked to the dispossessed Palestinians; Islamism; and reformism, often couched in demands for more access to political privilege and for stamping out corruption. Although Arab nationalism certainly enjoyed Shi'i adherents, given that Sunni Muslims numerically dominated the Arab world, many of the Shi'a would not see a unified Arab nation as a very ideal solution. In 1997 a fifth, incipient trend appeared from within Hezbollah when Shaikh Subhi al-Tufayli, the organization's former secretary-general, launched a populist dissident movement in the Beqaa valley among alienated farmers and tribesmen. Although the fortunes of secular movements and parties have declined, the loyalties and sympathies of the Shi'a remain widely distributed, and no single organization—including Hezbollah—may claim

an overwhelming majority following from among the Shi'a. By the 1990s, however, Hezbollah was certainly the best-organized political phenomenon and enjoyed the largest base of popular support.

Of the three distinctive trends preceding the emergence of Hezbollah in 1982, several secular parties, as well as the reformist Amal movement, retain a significant following. As the Lebanese civil war approached in the early 1970s and the armed Palestinian presence grew stronger, many young Shi'a found their place in one or another of the *fida'i*, or guerrilla fighter organizations.² Support for the Palestinian cause has now withered but not disappeared. Political loyalties within families are often shared between two or more organizations or are not "lent" to any political group at all. Hussein Nasrallah, a brother of Hasan Nasrallah, a founding member of Hezbollah and its famous secretary-general, is a life member of Amal. When the two groups were at each other's throats in the late 1980s, Hussein was on the front lines confronting his brother. Notwithstanding the long-term commitments of the Nasrallah brothers, one commonly meets individuals whose biography includes membership in three or four different political organizations, usually in sequence. In Lebanon political support is conditional and political loyalty sometimes has a short shelf life. Even so, currents have shifted dramatically in the last two decades in favor of Hezbollah, which offers an ideological vision that many Shi'a now find persuasive.

The Palestine resistance movement did more than directly challenge the power of Lebanon's entrenched elites; the resistance fighters were also paid comparatively well. It is widely known that many young men, and a few women, took up arms not only out of an ideological commitment but also simply to feed their families in a society offering few other economic opportunities. Once full-fledged civil war erupted in 1975, the Shi'a became the cannon fodder for the fedayeen. Indeed, more Shi'a died in the fighting than members of any other sect.

Even before the Israeli invasion of 1982, the fortunes of the armed Palestinian presence had soured, especially in southern Lebanon where the Amal movement gained many adherents at the expense of the parties of the Left. Amal had been founded in the early 1970s by Sayyid Musa al-Sadr, the Iran-born cleric of Lebanese ancestry, as a militia adjunct to the Harakat al-Mahrumin, the Movement of the Deprived, the predominantly Shi'i

populist reform movement. Amal was initially trained by Fatah, the largest organization in the PLO, and played a minor role in the fighting of 1975 and 1976. Although Amal was aligned with the Lebanese National Movement (LNM)—an array of radical and reformist groups opposed to the political dominance of the Maronite Christians—by 1976 the alignment was strained by Amal's support for Syria and its armed intervention to prevent a victory by the PLO and the LNM over the Maronite militias.

The Role of Musa al-Sadr

Musa al-Sadr, widely known as Imam Musa, was instrumental in improving the lot of the ordinary Shi'a in southern Lebanon while reducing the power of traditional Shi'i elites. His unrelenting opponent was Kamil al-As'ad, the powerful Shi'i political boss from the southern town of al-Tayyiba who had long grown accustomed to power. Kamil-bey ("bey" is a Turkish honorific) accurately viewed al-Sadr as a serious threat to his political power base, which was built on a foundation of subordination and patronage. Physically imposing and a man of intelligence, courage, personal charm, enormous energy, and great complexity, al-Sadr attracted a wide array of supporters. He set out to establish himself as the paramount leader of the Shi'i community. When he arrived in Lebanon in the late 1950s, the community was most known for its poverty and general underdevelopment.

Al-Sadr exhorted his followers not to accept their deprivation fatalistically; he believed that as long as his fellow Shi'i could speak out through their religion they could overcome their condition. As he once observed, "Whenever the poor involve themselves in a social revolution it is a confirmation that injustice is not predestined" (Norton 1987, 40). One of his first significant acts was to establish a vocational institute in the southern town of Burj al-Shimali. The institute, constructed at a cost of about \$165,000, became an important symbol of Musa al-Sadr's leadership, and it survives to this day under the competent supervision of his sister, known commonly as Sitt (or Lady) Rabab, one of the most admired women in the Lebanese Shi'i community.

Musa al-Sadr recognized the insecurity of the Maronites and acknowledged their need to maintain their monopoly hold on the presidency. Yet he was critical of this Christian community for its arrogant

stance toward the Muslims, and particularly the Shi'a. He argued that the Maronite-dominated government had neglected the South, where half the Shi'a lived. He was anticommunist, probably not only on principled grounds but because the various communist organizations were among his prime competitors for Shi'i recruits. While the two branches of the Ba'th Party (pro-Iraqi and pro-Syrian) were making significant inroads among the Shi'a of the South and of the Beirut suburbs, he appropriated their pan-Arab slogans. Although the movement he founded, Harakat al-Mahrumin and its Amal militia, was aligned with the ideologically eclectic and radical Lebanese National Movement in the early stages of the Lebanese civil war (1975–1976), he found its Druze leader, Kamal Jumblatt, irresponsible and exploitative of the Shi'a and willing “to combat the Christians to the last Shi'i” (Pakradouni 1983, 106).

Al-Sadr's stance toward the Palestinian presence in the South was similarly complex. He consistently expressed sympathy for Palestinian aspirations, and yet he was unwilling to countenance actions that exposed Lebanese citizens, especially Shi'i citizens of the South, to additional suffering. Imam Musa prophetically warned the PLO that it was not in its interest to establish a state within a state in Lebanon. The PLO's failure to heed this warning helped to spawn the alienation of their natural allies, the Shi'a, who actively resisted the Palestinian fighters in their midst only a few years later. In May 1976, al-Sadr threw his support to Syria when Syrian president Hafez al-Asad intervened in Lebanon on the side of the Maronite militias and against the LNM and its Palestinian allies. Although he mistrusted Syrian motives in Lebanon and felt that it was only Lebanon's indigestibility that prevented it from being swallowed by its more powerful neighbor, he nonetheless believed that the Syrians were an important ally in his challenge to Palestinian power in southern Lebanon.

Musa al-Sadr first came to prominence in 1969, when a Lebanese Supreme Islamic Shi'i Council came into existence with Imam Musa as its chairman. The council, formally authorized two years earlier by the Chamber of Deputies, or Lebanese parliament, provided for the first time a representative body for the Shi'a independent of the Sunni Muslims. It was a stunning confirmation of al-Sadr's status as the leading Shi'i cleric and one of the most important political figures in the country. The al-Sadr-led council quickly made its presence known by issuing demands in the

military, social, economic, and political realms, including improved measures for the defense of the South, provision of development funds, construction and improvement of schools and hospitals, and an increase in the number of Shi'a appointed to senior government positions. Unfortunately the response of the Lebanese government was ineffectual. Its Council of the South (Majlis al-Janub), created in the late 1960s in the wake of a general strike organized by al-Sadr and chartered to support the development of the region, became an infamous locus of corruption.

The growing influence of Musa al-Sadr prior to the civil war certainly gave direction to the political awakening of the Shi'a; it bears reiterating, however, that Imam Musa led only a fraction of his politically affiliated co-religionists. It was the multi-confessional parties and militias that attracted the majority of Shi'i recruits, and many more Shi'a carried arms under the colors of these organizations than under Amal. Perhaps al-Sadr's single most important success was to reduce the authority and influence of the traditional Shi'i elites, but it was the civil war and the associated explosion of extralegal organizations that smashed the power of many political personalities long comfortable in privilege and power.

Whatever he may have been, and despite his occasionally vehement histrionics, Musa al-Sadr was hardly a man of war. His weapons were words, and in a country where the force of arms increasingly held sway, his political efforts were eventually short-circuited. He seemed destined to be eclipsed by the violence that engulfed Lebanon.

In August 1978 al-Sadr flew from Beirut to Tripoli with two aides to attend ceremonies commemorating the ascent of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi to power in 1969. When his failure to arrive at the ceremony was noticed, rumors circulated that he had left for Italy. The Libyan government quickly claimed to have evidence that al-Sadr had indeed left the country. However, supporters of the missing cleric pointed out that al-Sadr's baggage was found in a Tripoli hotel and there was no evidence of his arrival in Rome. Airline crews could not confirm that al-Sadr had ever flown from Libya to Italy. Although his fate is unknown to this day, Gaddafi is widely suspected of having ordered his assassination because, so the rumors have it, Gaddafi viewed him as a political rival.

The Resurgence of Amal

Amal, which was fading into obscurity after the eruption of the civil war in 1975, began an impressive resurgence in part because of the intense Shi'i outcry after al-Sadr's enigmatic disappearance. Also contributing to Amal's renewed popularity was, of course, Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1978 and the historic Iranian revolution of 1978–79, which provided an exemplar for action, if not a precise model for emulation.

Amal drew substantial support from the growing Shi'i middle class, for whom the movement represented an assertive voice against the power of the political *zu'ama*. Equally important, Amal challenged the stifling and often brutal domination of the Palestinian guerrillas whose public support plummeted in the late 1970s and early 1980s for bringing southern Lebanon into the crossfire with Israel.

Israel's invasion of 1978, the "Litani Operation," though minor compared to the wars yet to come in 1982 and 2006, displaced hundreds of thousands of Lebanese from the southern region. Relations between the Shi'a in the South and the Palestinian resistance and its Lebanese affiliates were deteriorating. Not only were the Shi'a weary of being caught in the Israeli-Palestinian cross fire, but they increasingly viewed the Palestinians as an occupying force prone to high-handedness and brutality. Amal militiamen and Palestinian guerrillas clashed with increasing frequency. For most Amal supporters, the overriding and immediate concern was security, and their efforts were often centered on forming local home-guards or militias that, naturally, the PLO viewed with great suspicion. Fierce confrontations also erupted between Amal partisans and pro-Iraq groups, such as the Arab Ba'th (Resurrection) Party, the Nationalist Party, and the Iraq-sponsored Arab Liberation Front, given the Iraqi regime's often brutal treatment of Shi'i Muslims.

Although Amal resistance fighters actively opposed the continuing Israeli occupation of Lebanon, especially after 1983, Amal tacitly welcomed the Israeli invasion of June 1982 because it broke the power of the Palestinian fighters in the South. Amal leaders, especially Nabih Berri and Daoud Suleiman Daoud, the powerful leader in the South until his assassination under still murky circumstances in the late 1980s, sought a *modus vivendi* with Israel and the United States. Berri's participation in the

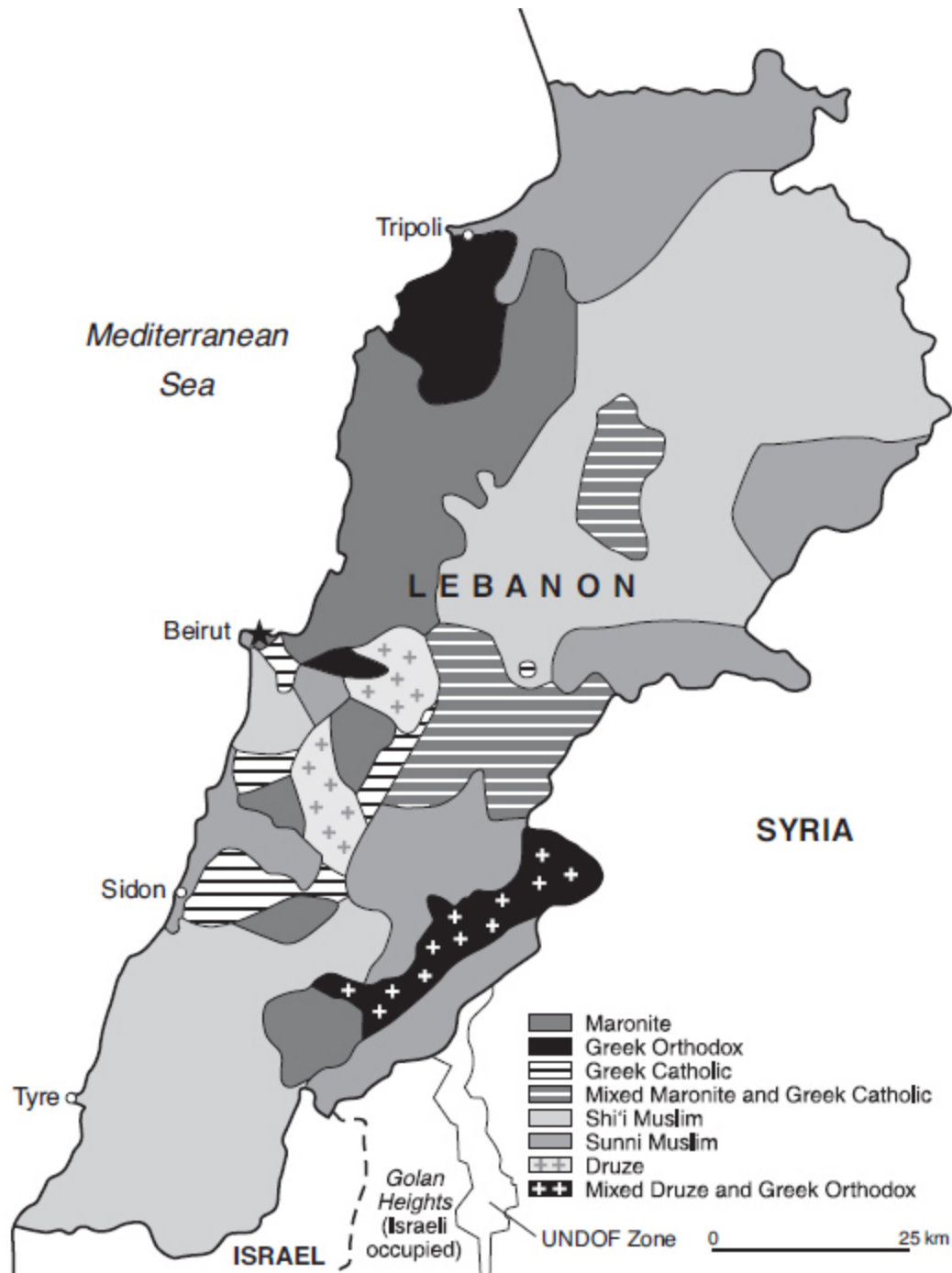
National Salvation Committee—which had been created by Lebanese president Elias Sarkis to foster dialogue among Lebanon’s most powerful militia leaders during the Israeli siege of Beirut—was castigated by young radicals within Amal who described the Committee as no more than an “American-Israeli bridge” allowing the United States to enter and control Lebanon (Norton 1987, 105). There is no doubt that Berri’s willingness to contemplate a deal that would favor Syria’s enemies also provoked Damascus to lend support to Hezbollah as a counterweight to Amal.

Later, from 1985 to 1988, the militia and sympathetic units of the Lebanese army—spurred on by Syria—conducted its “war of the camps” to prevent the Palestinians from regaining the position of dominance they had enjoyed prior to the Israeli invasion. The campaign prompted Amal’s emerging political rival among the Lebanese Shi’a, Hezbollah, to assist the Palestinians. (The “war of the camps” is discussed further in [chapter 4](#).)

As the civil war in Lebanon drew to a close in the late 1980s, Amal was overstretched and weakened. What had been a dynamic and progressive movement in the early 1980s, with extensive popular support, now became a full-blown patronage system with all the corruption, inefficiency, and inequity that Amal had long ascribed to the traditional *zu‘ama*. As for Nabih Berri, with the end of the internal war in 1990 he became speaker of the parliament and remains a fixture in Lebanese politics. The irony of Berri’s transformation from populist nemesis of the confessional system to powerful and wealthy denizen of confessional politics is not lost on the Lebanese.

After Imam Musa’s disappearance, the Supreme Islamic Shi‘i Council was taken over by the cerebral Shi‘i *‘alim*,³ Shaikh Muhammad Mahdi Shams al-Din, an intellectually gifted cleric without a significant grassroots following. Under his guidance, however, the council became especially active in sponsoring and launching a series of ecumenical exchanges, intended to foster dialogue between Christians and Muslims. Shams al-Din emphasized the spiritual renewal of Muslims rather than the goal of seeking power, which, he argued, is often at cross purposes with the goal of Islamic renewal. Although it still enjoys respect as a religious and political focal point of the growing Shi‘i professional class, it has been eclipsed both by Amal and Hezbollah, especially since Shams al-Din’s death from lung cancer in 2001. Today the group is led by the plain-spoken cleric and

Amal's longtime ally 'Abd al-Amr Qabalan, the Ja'fari Mufti al-Mumtaz, that is, the officially recognized senior expert on Shi'i religious law. This author was first introduced to him, in fact, in 1980 by the Amal leader in the South, Daoud Suleiman Daoud, at an informal Amal gathering in a Shi'i village. Qabalan, tellingly, remains the vice president of the council; the post of president is vacant. Although the council no longer has the extensive popular support it had during its years under al-Sadr's leadership, it does enjoy guaranteed access to the state and remains a potential institutional rival to Amal as well as to Hezbollah.



MAP 2 Lebanon's major confessional groups (sects) and the areas where they predominate.

¹ At the end of the civil war the Copts became another recognized confession, bringing the total number to eighteen. The original seventeen included four Muslim sects: Sunni, Shi'i, Alawi, and Druze; twelve Christian sects: Assyrian, Syriac Catholic, Syriac Orthodox, Chaldean, Maronite, "Rome" Catholic, Greek Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Armenian Catholic,

evangelical, and smaller Christian sects, which are considered one group; and Jewish (few Jews remain in Lebanon today, but children born of Lebanese Jewish parents may register as citizens at Lebanese embassies).

² *Fida'i* (pl., *fida'iyun*, rendered often as fedayeen) is a common Arabic term for one who sacrifices himself; that is, a guerrilla fighter.

³ The term *'alim* (pl., *'ulama*), which literally means "scholar," connotes a person who has acquired specialized religious knowledge, whether in philosophy, jurisprudence, or rhetoric, or who has profound knowledge of the Quran. Although it is convenient to think of an *'alim* as a cleric or member of the clergy, this is only an approximation, as the *'alim* may not necessarily hold any formal religious position, and there is no close equivalent to the concept of ordination in Islam. In Christianity, a "man of religion" is often understood to be a member of the clergy, whereas in Islam a *rajul al-tadayyun* means, literally, a religious man, not an *'alim*.

Chapter 2

The Founding of Hezbollah

The late 1970s and early 1980s were a time of great foment, enthusiasm, and transition among the Shi'a of Lebanon. Amal, as noted in [chapter 1](#), enjoyed a resurgence among the Shi'a of southern Lebanon, particularly following the disappearance of Sayyid Musa al-Sadr in Libya in August 1978 and the example set by the Shi'a-led Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1978–79. Originally an adjunct militia to the Movement of the Deprived, Amal expanded into a political reform movement as well, and its new leaders were not clerics but members of the lay middle class, typified by the lawyer Nabih Berri, who became leader in 1979. Berri's father, Mustafa, had been a trader in Sierra Leone, one of thousands of Shi'a who had left Lebanon to seek opportunities in Africa. (Nabih was born in Freetown, Sierra Leone's capital.)

In the early 1980s, Amal embraced many ideological currents and disagreements and had no firm hierarchy. What most adherents of the movement shared was a disdain for the *zu'ama* (political bosses), who traditionally dominated Shi'i society, and anger toward Palestinian guerrillas and their allies. Although one heard expressions of hatred toward Israel, particularly in the South, these were far less common and less intense than they became a quarter-century later.



A view of southern Lebanon, where Hezbollah and the Amal movement compete for support. Copyright © A. R. Norton, 2006.

Amal officials at the time would speak with admiration of Iranian intellectuals such as ‘Ali Shariati, the Paris-trained Iranian modernist and intellectual who urged Muslims to avoid becoming “humanoids” uncritically emulating the West. Shariati, who died in 1977 and was buried in Damascus with a eulogy delivered by his friend Musa al-Sadr, exhorted his multitude of readers and listeners to find their identity in Islam, especially in the exemplary courage of the prophet Muhammad’s grandson, Hussein, whose martyrdom in 680 c.e. or 60 a.h. (discussed in [chapter 3](#)) became the model for the Iranian Revolution. Mehdi Bazargan, head of Iran’s Freedom Movement and revolutionary Iran’s first prime minister, was also accorded great respect, as was Mustafa Chamran, a close associate of Imam Musa who earned his engineering Ph.D. from the University of California, Berkeley. Each of the three was a noted reformer, but Bazargan was pushed aside in Iran as the revolution grew more radical, and Chamran, who became chair of the Supreme Defense Council in Iran, died under

mysterious circumstances in a plane crash on the Iraqi front in the first year of the eight-year Iran-Iraq War (1980–88).

The Iraq Connection

Amal officials also spoke with deep respect for Imam Musa's Iraqi cousin Ayatollah Muhammad Baqr al-Sadr of al-Najaf, the Iraqi cleric who suffered summary execution in Iraq, in April 1980, after he was forced to watch the rape and murder of his sister. In May 1980, when the author arrived in southern Lebanon, the horrid killing of Baqr al-Sadr was often discussed, usually coupled with a denunciation of Iraq—and its Lebanese allies. Baqr al-Sadr was a major thinker whose books in Arabic, particularly *Iqtisaduna* (Our Economy) are revered as seminal. (His nephew, of course, is Muqtada al-Sadr, the young firebrand who formed the Jaysh al-Mahdi [the Army of the Guided One] in Iraq after Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime was toppled in 2003.) In my visits with middle-class Amal supporters and officials, in 1980 and 1981 and many times later, I often spotted Baqr al-Sadr's books on a bookshelf, but perhaps more as an emblem of respect than as a volume that actually had been read. In Lebanese Shi'i villages, in those early chaotic days, posters honoring Baqr al-Sadr were almost as widespread as those featuring Musa al-Sadr, which far outnumbered images of Ayatollah Khomeini.

When young Lebanese Shi'i men were selected for a religious education, their traditional destinations had been the revered Shi'i seminaries of al-Najaf or Karbala in Iraq. By the end of the 1970s, however, as the revolution in Iran gathered force, Iraq had become inhospitable for foreign Shi'a. In 1978 Ayatollah Khomeini was himself expelled from Iraq at the insistence of the Shah, thereby gaining international notoriety in a suburb of Paris with much of the international media just a few steps away as the Iranian revolution gathered force. Young Lebanese Shi'i clerics such as Subhi al-Tufayli and 'Abbas al-Musawi, who later played important leadership roles in Hezbollah's early days, trickled back into Lebanon from Iraq. Al-Musawi established a *hawza*,¹ or religious seminary, in Baalbak, where the future Hezbollah leader Sayyid Hasan Nasrallah became his student and protégé. The returnees from Iraq brought with them revolutionary fervor and the commitment to change their societies. They

shared antipathy toward Israel and loyalty to Iran. Most of the returnees were members of the Hizb al-Da'wa party ("Party of the [Islamic] Call"), founded in Iraq in 1958 as an Islamic alternative to the Communist Party. The Lebanese Da'wa was disbanded, and its erstwhile members were instructed by party strategists to infiltrate the secular Amal and reform it from within. Sayyid Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah urged them in the same direction—away from Amal's de facto secularism toward something approximating an Islamic system of rule (Sankari 2005, 172). After Musa al-Sadr's disappearance in 1978, Fadlallah was the most influential 'alim in Lebanon.

Iranian revolutionaries, meanwhile, had long been familiar with Lebanon. Many, including Mohsen Rafiqdost, who became the head of the Pasdaran or Revolutionary Guard, had trained in the Beqaa valley of Lebanon with the PLO. This is a prime reason for the extraordinarily enthusiastic reception that Yasser Arafat enjoyed in Tehran in February 1979, just weeks after the triumphant return of Khomeini. Arafat was handed the keys to the Israeli Embassy, among other honors.

For its part, Syria, in the early 1980s, had a very different future in mind. It saw in Amal a mechanism for checking Palestinian power in Lebanon, especially if Arafat should seek his own route to peace, deserting Syria. By 1980 and 1981 young Amalists were going off to train in Syria and coming back wearing new Syria-style uniforms and sporting military-style radios. As tensions between Amal and the Palestinians worsened in 1981 and 1982, many expected a war—but not with Israel. Some leading Amal figures even argued that they were in an objective alliance with Israel against Palestinian guerrillas.

The 1982 Israeli Invasion

Israel invaded Lebanon on June 6, 1982, following an eleven-month ceasefire with the PLO, which Israel claimed had been broken by the attempted assassination of the Israeli ambassador to the United Kingdom Shlomo Argov, who had been badly wounded but survived. It made little difference to the Israelis that the assassination had been carried out by a renegade Palestinian group led by the infamous Sabri al-Banna ("Abu Nidal"), a blood foe of the PLO. The invasion gave Ariel Sharon, then the Israeli

defense minister, carte blanche to pursue his own dream of destroying the PLO as a political force in the region and putting in place a pliant government in Beirut that would become the second Arab state, after Egypt, to enter into a formal peace agreement with Israel (Schiff and Ya'ari 1984). Within the Israeli government at the time—as within the American foreign policy establishment—there was little understanding of the developments under way among the Shi'i Muslims of Lebanon, and no analysis was made of the impact of this invasion on them.

Even if Israel had not launched its invasion of southern Lebanon in 1982, the young would-be revolutionaries among the Shi'a would have pursued their path of emulating Iran's Islamic revolution. Undoubtedly, however, the invasion pushed the Shi'a further in this direction, creating conditions for the establishment and proliferation of Hezbollah. Former Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak put the matter succinctly in July 2006: "When we entered Lebanon ... there was no Hezbollah. We were accepted with perfumed rice and flowers by the Shia in the south. It was our presence there that created Hezbollah" (*Newsweek*, July 18, 2006). As Barak's comment suggests, by occupying Lebanon rather than promptly withdrawing, Israel wore out its warm welcome and provided a context for Hezbollah to grow.

Another Israeli prime minister, Yitzhak Rabin, who was assassinated in 1995, made precisely the same point in 1987, speaking of how Israel had let the "genie out of the bottle."² When Rabin asked to see me in December 1984, I urged him to leave Lebanon because a continued Israeli presence would inevitably radicalize the Shi'i community. He replied, to the best of my recollection, "Professor, I am a politician, and what will I say to the people of Kiryat Shimona when the rockets fall?"³ And so the die was cast.

Hezbollah Emerges

Although its leading members refer to 1982 as the year the group was founded, Hezbollah did not exist as a coherent organization until the mid-1980s. From 1982 through the mid-1980s it was less an organization than a cabal. The Lebanese who comprised its first cadre were young, committed revolutionaries, in some cases barely in their twenties. Sayyid Hasan Nasrallah, who was only twenty-two in 1982, had been a rising star in his

teens as an Amal representative in al-Bazuriya, his village in southern Lebanon. His mentor, thirty-year-old Sayyid ‘Abbas al-Musawi, from Nabisheet in the Beqaa valley, had taken him under his wing in al-Najaf in 1982 at the direction of Baqr al-Sadr. Raghib Harb, also thirty years old at the time of the Israeli invasion, was born in Jibsheel in the South. Harb, a major early leader of the resistance in the South, would be assassinated, probably by Israel, in 1984. And Shaikh Subhi al-Tufayli, a firebrand from Brital outside Baalbak, who would become Hezbollah’s first secretary-general in 1989, was only thirty-four in 1982.

Iran and Syria share credit for sponsoring these young revolutionaries, although Iran certainly played the leading role. For Iran, the creation of Hezbollah was a realization of the revolutionary state’s zealous campaign to spread the message of the self-styled “Islamic revolution.” From Syria’s standpoint, the new militant Shi‘i party was a fortuitous instrument for preserving Syrian interests: supporting Hezbollah allowed Syria to maintain its alliance with Iran, gain the means for striking indirectly at both Israel and the United States, and keep its Lebanese allies, including the Amal movement, in line.

But Syria’s support of the young Shi‘i militants was ambivalent. The 1980s were rocky times in Syria’s relations with Iran, and the al-Asad regime in Damascus remained wary of Hezbollah and its ties to the Islamic republic for a full decade. While maintaining its rapport with Hezbollah throughout the 1980s, Damascus also reinforced its ties to Amal. The U.S. government unwittingly aided Syria in this tactic when Amal’s political overtures to Washington, in 1982, yielded little benefit.

Syria has no overall interest in seeing Amal or Hezbollah (or any other political force) triumph in Lebanon, and its strategy in Lebanon has consistently followed the principles of Realpolitik. To paraphrase the dictum of Lord Palmertson, Syria has neither eternal allies nor perpetual enemies in Lebanon. The Hezbollah leadership understands this and maintains its strategic alliance with Damascus, ever mindful that alliances of convenience are expendable by definition.

The Hezbollah Worldview

Notwithstanding this Syrian connection, throughout the 1980s Hezbollah hewed closely to the Iranian line. In fact, its remarkable programmatic document of 1985, an open letter addressed to the “Downtrodden in Lebanon and in the World,” bears a strong made-in-Tehran coloration (translation in Norton 1987, 167–87).⁴ This remarkable document emphasized that the 1978–79 revolution in Iran served as an inspiration to action, a proof of what can be accomplished when the faithful gather under the banner of Islam. “We address all the Arab and Islamic peoples to declare to them that the Muslim’s experience in Islamic Iran left no one any excuse since it proved beyond all doubt that bare chests motivated by faith are capable, with God’s help, of breaking the iron and oppression of tyrannical regimes” (183–84). “It is time to realize that all the Western ideas concerning man’s origin and nature cannot respond to man’s aspirations or rescue him from the darkness of misguidedness and ignorance” (184). Islam is the answer. “Only Islam can bring about man’s renaissance, progress, and creativity because ‘He lights with the oil of an olive tree that is neither Eastern nor Western, a tree whose oil burns, even if not touched by fire, to light the path. God leads to His light whomever He wishes’” (184).

Hezbollah released this revealing 1985 document to mark the first anniversary of the assassination of Shaikh Raghib Harb, the bright young cleric of Jibsheet in southern Lebanon. It declares that the world is divided between the oppressed and the oppressors, the latter being “the countries of the arrogant world”—especially the United States and the Soviet Union (still Cold War adversaries in 1985)—who struggle for influence at the expense of the Third World. “Consequently, the oppressed countries have become the struggle’s bone of contention and the oppressed peoples have become its fuel” (178). In Iran the ethos of the revolution was summed up by the slogan “neither East nor West,” which is also Hezbollah’s view. One commentator, writing in the Hezbollah newspaper *al-‘Ahd*, puts the two superpowers on the same plane: “The Soviets are not one iota different from the Americans in terms of political danger, indeed are more dangerous than them in terms of ideological considerations as well, and this requires that light be shed on this fact and that the Soviets be assigned their proper place in the forces striving to strike at the interests of the Muslim people and arrogate their political present and future” (*al-‘Ahd*, May 9, 1987, 12). Within Lebanon, Hezbollah proved to be especially intolerant of the

Communist Party. Dozens, if not hundreds, of party members were killed in a brutal, bloody campaign of suppression and assassination in 1984 and 1985.

The starring role for Islam's main enemy, according to the Hezbollah document, went to the United States, which was charged with using its "spearhead," Israel, to directly or indirectly inflict suffering upon the Muslims of Lebanon (179). "Imam Khomeini, the leader, has repeatedly stressed that America is the reason for all our catastrophes and the source of all malice. By fighting it, we are only exercising our legitimate right to defend our Islam and the dignity of our nation" (170).

The French were also attacked, largely because of their long-standing support of the Maronite community in Lebanon and for their arms sales to Iraq. In August 1989, for example, the Hezbollah radio station noted that the French should be "taught a lesson because of their scorn for other people and lack of respect for Lebanese Muslims" (*International Herald Tribune*, August 24, 1989).

In Hezbollah's worldview, compromise and mediation were no answer. Where fractiousness existed among Muslims, it had to have been the product of imperialism. Disunity was caused by imperialism and its agents, including compromisers, evil 'ulama, and the leaders imposed by colonialism (184). It followed, then, that the Lebanese government was corrupt to its core. No renovation could make it palatable, and those who pursued such solutions were traitors to Islam. Self-help was the only answer. The superpowers were corrupt. They had no answers for Lebanon. When the Muslims were under brutal attack in 1982, no one came to their rescue. "We appealed to the world's conscience but heard nothing from and found no trace of it" (170). The United Nations, despite its pretensions, merely served the interests of the arrogant superpowers or was, at least, prevented from acting by the tacit conspiracy of the superpowers through their use of the veto. The only answer was to fight under the banner of Islam. "Thus, we have seen that aggression can be repelled only with the sacrifice of blood, and that freedom is not given but regained with the sacrifice of both heart and soul" (171).

Hezbollah thus positioned itself as a force resisting the actions of Israel and the superpowers, which have led to subjugation and oppression throughout the Third World. The objective was to free Lebanon from the

manipulation and chicanery of the malevolent outside powers in order to achieve “the final departure of America, France, and their allies from Lebanon and the termination of the influence of any imperialist power in the country” (173).

One of the burdens of the open letter was to explain and justify Hezbollah’s use of violence, which, it is argued, the West trivialized as “a handful of fanatics and terrorists who are only concerned with blowing up drinking, gambling, and entertainment spots” (170). “Each of us is a combat soldier when the call of *jihad* demands it and each of us undertakes his task in the battle in accordance with his lawful assignment within the framework of action under the guardianship of the leader jurisprudent” (169).

Hezbollah regards negotiations with Israel as only a form of compromise that validates Israel’s occupation of Palestine. “We condemn strongly all the plans for mediation between us and Israel and we consider the mediators a hostile party because their mediation will only serve to acknowledge the legitimacy of the Zionist occupation of Palestine” (179). The ultimate objective is to destroy Israel and to liberate Palestine. Thus “Israel’s final departure from Lebanon is a prelude to its final obliteration from existence and the liberation of venerable Jerusalem from the talons of occupation” (173). This absolutism explains the operational links between Hezbollah and the rejectionist Palestinian groups that have opposed the efforts of mainstream PLO officials to make peace with Israel.

A key unanswered question in the letter is, precisely, Hezbollah’s political design for Lebanon, a significant omission in view of that organization’s expressed disdain for the existing political system. The letter only states that, once Lebanon is freed from external and internal domination, the Lebanese will be allowed to determine their fate; if they choose freely, they will only choose Islam. Whether the goal is clerical rule under the concept of the *wilayat al-faqih*, the creation of an Islamic republic on the Iranian model, is not made clear in the open letter. Some scholars claim that Hezbollah was not calling for “guardianship” on the Iran model but rather the “rule of the *shari‘a*” or Islamic law, but this would be a distinction without difference.

The application of *shari‘a* in the context of Khomeini’s neo-Shi‘ism requires clerical guardianship. In any event, given the doctrinal role of the *mujtahids*, clerics qualified to independently interpret religious law and

responsibility, and the requirement of *taqlid* (imitation) in Shi‘i Islam, a state founded on the *shari‘a* could scarcely function without regular recourse to the *mujtahids*. In Shi‘i Islam, in the absence of the Awaited Imam (Imam al-Muntazar), the adherent must “imitate” (*taqlid*) the legal rulings of the *mujtahids*. This is the doctrinal foundation for the influence of the clerics in Shi‘ism, in contrast to the more fluid conception of religious authority held by Sunni Islam. For both Sunni and Shi‘i Muslims, Islam is a system of law, and individuals have been known to “convert” from one legal school to another or from one clerical authority to another to exploit a more advantageous legal interpretation. Thus a former prime minister of Lebanon, Salim al-Huss, a Sunni Muslim, performed a technical one-day conversion to Shi‘ism to improve inheritance rights for his daughter under the Shi‘i Ja‘fari legal interpretation. Shi‘i inheritance rules are more favorable to daughters than the Sunni schools of law.

The open letter also addresses the role of the *‘ulama*, implicitly the bulk of the Sunni *‘ulamas* as well as those Shi‘i clerics who do not actively support Hezbollah: “Therefore, one of your most important responsibilities, O Muslim *‘ulama*, is to educate the Muslims to abide by the dictates of Islam, to point out to them the political line they should follow, to lead them toward glory and honor, and to devote attention to the religious institutes so that they may graduate leaders faithful to God and eager to uphold religion and the nation” (186). “We do not hide our commitment to the rule of Islam and that we urge an Islamic system that alone guarantees justice and dignity for all and prevents any new imperialist attempt to infiltrate our country” (173). Hezbollah advocates “adoption of the Islamic system on the basis of free and direct selection by the people, not the basis of forceful imposition, as some people imagine” (175). Unfortunately the organization’s history of violence against its political and ideological rivals casts doubt on Hezbollah’s commitment to voluntarism. Anecdotal data from nonaffiliated Shi‘a living in the Hezbollah-dominated regions only deepened these doubts.

The letter had been issued at a time of real exultation born from a string of military and political successes that humiliated both the United States and Israel. Hezbollah played a major role in the departure of the American marines from Lebanon and the scuttling of the U.S.-brokered May 17, 1983, agreement between Lebanon and Israel, and the organization held the world

at bay over the fate of Western hostages, the last hostage not released until 1991. Equally impressive was that it forced an Israeli withdrawal from most of Lebanese territory. In January 1985, only a month before the letter was issued, Israel announced its decision to “redeploy” its forces and then retreated to the border region where its self-declared “security zone” became a magnet for Hezbollah attacks that continued through the 1990s (Norton 1993).

Implementing the Design

True to the often intransigent and consistently militant tone of the open letter, Hezbollah moved aggressively in the mid-to late-1980s to strike at Westerners in Lebanon and at Western influence. Groups linked to Hezbollah, if not directly controlled by the party, kidnapped dozens of foreigners and held them hostage for as long as seven years in the case of the American journalist Terry Anderson. Although the myriad groups that abducted foreigners often pursued their own local agendas, particularly the freeing of Lebanese held in Kuwaiti and Israeli prisons, the captors were also sensitive to the interests and influence of Iran. As a result, freeing captives required a series of complex negotiations involving the release of Iranian assets frozen by the United States, the release of Lebanese prisoners held by Israel, and, more importantly, a government in Tehran determined to end the hostage crisis. Negotiations were conducted under the personal auspices of UN Secretary-General Perez de Cuellar, and, by the early 1990s, Iranian officials (not least, President Hashemi Rafsanjani) clearly wished to resolve the issue. President George H. W. Bush’s January 1989 inaugural promise that “goodwill begets goodwill” created a mood of expectancy in Tehran.

Even so, long, tedious negotiations were required between Perez de Cuellar’s representative, Giandominico Picco, and the captors themselves. At that point in Lebanon’s history, the civil war had drawn to a close, most Lebanese did not support the taking of hostages (few ever did), and the conclusion of the Cold War was pregnant with potential to redefine the dimensions of politics in the region. Picco’s valuable book, *Man without a Gun*, presents an insider’s account of negotiations that were often as much between the captors as with their Italian interlocutor. Picco does not hide his

disappointment that the United States did not, in the end, return goodwill for goodwill in terms of reciprocating Iranian efforts to free the hostages (Picco 1999).

Perhaps the signal act of the period was the June 1985 skyjacking of TWA flight 847 to Beirut, masterminded by the infamous Imad Mughniyah, who continues to be linked to Hezbollah's External Security Organization. Hezbollah was deeply implicated in the hijacking, which was intended to highlight the fate of 766 Lebanese prisoners held in Israel (primarily in the Atlit prison), many of whom languished in extremely difficult conditions, with no recourse to the protections of international law. Some of the captives had participated in resistance operations, but others were merely suspects that Israel held hostage.

The hijacking exposed the deep tensions between Hezbollah and Amal, for when Amal leader Nabih Berri attempted to mediate the crisis, Hezbollah heatedly objected that Berri had no ability to speak on its behalf. The crisis ended only when Israel quietly agreed to release Lebanese prisoners from the Atlit prison, and especially when Iranian Speaker Hashemi Rafsanjani intervened to pressure the perpetrators to bring the crisis to an end.

By then there was much tension between Amal and Hezbollah, which finally exploded in 1988–89, with two militias fighting to win the Shi'i heartland in the South, as well as the teeming southern suburbs of Beirut, where fully half the Shi'i population resides. The fighting was sparked by the kidnapping of U.S. Marine Lt. Colonel William R. Higgins, who was serving with UN forces in the South. The operation was carried out by a splinter group of Amal—the “Believers’ Resistance,” led by the former Lebanese army intelligence sergeant Mustafa Dirani—a group sympathetic to Hezbollah. Dirani himself was later kidnapped by Israeli forces from his Beqaa valley village in 1994 and released in 2004 in a prisoner exchange (more on this in [chapter 4](#)).

The Higgins incident threatened Amal's strategy of maintaining a cooperative working relationship with the UNIFIL (United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon), so Amal reacted by attempting to find Higgins and free him. The kidnappers evaded the Amal searchers, and Higgins was later brutally murdered, but not before the incident triggered serious clashes between Amal and Hezbollah, allowing Amal to momentarily consolidate

its grip on southern Lebanon. Shortly thereafter, in the fall of 1988, fighting erupted in the southern suburbs of Beirut, and Amal was badly defeated, losing virtually its entire military foothold in the capital. Hezbollah's efforts in 1989 to roll back Amal influence in the South succeeded in eroding Amal's position there, though Amal remains popular in the South.

Hezbollah certainly served as a stalking horse for Iranian interests, especially in the 1980s, but by the end of the decade Iran's policies were changing—often in ways unsettling to devotees of the Islamic revolution—and its support for Hezbollah wavered. In 1988 the first Gulf war, which Ayatollah Khomeini had vowed to pursue until Saddam Hussein was toppled, ended with Iran embracing a cease-fire. Iran's submission inspired sarcastic graffiti in Lebanon: "Why 598 and not 425?" This was a reference to UN Security Council Resolution 598 that ended the war and Resolution 425 that dealt with the restoration of security in southern Lebanon. With Khomeini's death in 1989, this charismatic symbol of the revolution was replaced by men of more modest views who now had to address the mundane but daunting challenges of restoring post-revolutionary Iran. The Iranian president, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, and the new Iranian leadership of the early 1990s moved to reorient their policy more toward the broader Shi'i community and Lebanon as a whole, distancing themselves from militias, at least for a few years (Norton 1990a, 132). Internecine fighting between Amal and Hezbollah had provoked a significant change of attitude in Tehran, where the bloodletting in Lebanon was viewed with disgust. Because the vicious fighting between the two groups cost many civilian lives, Rafsanjani reacted sharply, pointedly condemning both sides for their actions. But Iran was not merely outraged at the bloodshed in Lebanon, for 1990 marked the closing days of the Cold War, the assembling of an international coalition against Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, and the long overdue end of the Lebanese civil war. Thus Iran was adjusting to the new balance of power in the world in which U.S. power was without rival.

Hezbollah, from its first moments, had always defined itself in contrast to Amal. The coterie of young clerics who made up Hezbollah's cadre in the 1980s and early 1990s resented Amal's nonclerical leadership and accommodation with Lebanese clientelism. Unlike the Amal politicians, who were intent on comprising the new Shi'i bourgeoisie, the leaders of

Hezbollah—brimming with revolutionary passion—refused to accommodate a corrupt political system, or so they said in the 1980s. Most of them had been trained in Najaf, Karbala, and Qum, where they were ideologically inculcated by Muhammad Baqr al-Sadr, Muhsin al-Hakim, and Ruhollah al-Musavi Khomeini, but by the 1990s their fervor began to give way to a more realistic sense of the possible.

In contrast to the fierce ideological tenor in the 1985 open letter, Hezbollah now pragmatically confronted the shifting political landscape of regional politics, as well as the changing terrain of Lebanese politics. The result has been the evolution to a Janus-faced organization, retaining a fierce commitment to confront Israel's occupation in southern Lebanon while engaging in precisely the game of confessional Lebanese politics that they previously had denounced. Hezbollah was affected by the change in the Iranian regime, especially after the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989, as well as by Syria's growing political and military dominance in Lebanon. Meantime, there is little doubt that Hezbollah has proved responsive to the attitudes and aspirations of its domestic constituency. This constituency includes a large portion of the expanding Shi'i middle class that grew skeptical of the Amal movement and its corruption, and came to admire Hezbollah's relative integrity.

The party's broadened constituency brings with it new requisites for sustaining support, as the new Shi'i middle class does not yearn to live in an Islamic Republic, least of all the Islamic Republic of Lebanon. Hezbollah's virtue aside, it frequently cites its goal to be an open political system with a place at the table of government, instead of standing as a supplicant at the back door of politics. Periodic hints have come from leading Hezbollah officials, including Nasrallah and Deputy Secretary-General Na'im Qassem, that the 1985 open letter is obsolete and no longer an authoritative guide to the party's positions. This issue was the topic of a documentary on al-Jazeera TV in September 1998. A number of party officials, members, supporters, and journalists were interviewed for the program (Alagha 2006, 328). The conclusion reached was that the open letter belonged to a certain historical moment that had passed. Hezbollah officials, in various settings in Lebanon, have made the same point to this author. Still, the bald fact is that the 1985 program has not been explicitly replaced. The result is that skeptics and opponents of the party are left with a picture of ambivalence

and, perhaps, dissimulation, which has only been sharpened by Hezbollah's behavior in the early twenty-first century.

¹ In the Iraqi or Iranian context, *hawza* refers to a complex of seminaries roughly resembling a university with affiliated colleges, as in the al-Najaf *hawza* led in 2006 by Ayatollah 'Ali Sistani. In Lebanon, in contrast, *hawza* refers to a single seminary. Ruha Jurdi Abisaab, a leading authority on the topic, reports that, in the 1990s, there were sixteen hawzas in Lebanon with about six hundred scholars enrolled (Abisaab 2006).

² Yitzhak Rabin made this comment a number of times, including on the British Grenada Productions documentary film *The Sword of Islam* (1987). He also made the comment to me in a meeting in New York City, but I do not recall the year.

³ The author would like to thank Professor Yossi Kostiner of Tel Aviv University for reminding him of this meeting.

⁴ The page references in the text below are to the translation in Norton 1987, 167–87.

Chapter 3

Being a Shi‘i Muslim in the Twenty-first Century

About 10 percent of all Muslims in the world are Shi‘a. Both Shi‘a and the majority Sunni Muslims believe that the prophet Muhammad is the “Rasul,” the Messenger of Allah, chosen by God to transmit His Word, and both accord special, central reverence to his memory, deeds, and actions as the last and most important prophet.

Although several doctrinal and legal issues separate the minority Shi‘a from the Sunni majority, the most serious split is over the succession after the death of Prophet Muhammad in 632 c.e. (10 a.h.). Only ‘Ali, the fourth and last of the four Rashidun—the “rightly guided” successors or Caliphs—is considered to have been a legitimate heir to the prophet by both the Shi‘a and the Sunnis. Caliph ‘Ali, the son-in-law and cousin of Muhammad, served four years until his assassination in 660 c.e. in Kufa, a city in modern-day Iraq.

‘Ali’s death in Kufa, although mourned, has not made the deepest mark on Shi‘ism. The event that most shaped the ethos of Shi‘a is called ‘Ashura, which refers to the fate of the grandson of the prophet Imam Hussein. Since the Shi‘a believe that the successor should derive from the House of the Prophet, the sons of ‘Ali and his wife, the Prophet’s daughter Fatimah, were favored. Two sons, Hasan and Hussein, are accepted by all Shi‘a as leaders or Imams of the Muslim community. (A third son of ‘Ali by a different mother, ‘Abbas, is a figure of military prowess and valor in Shi‘i history and, as we shall see, has a leading role in Shi‘a remembrance of that era.)



A museum in the village of Nabisheet, in the Beqaa valley, commemorates the Hezbollah martyrs who have died in southern Lebanon fighting Israel. The village is the birthplace of ‘Abbas al-Musawi, the Secretary-General of Hezbollah, who was assassinated, along with his wife and two children, by Israel. Copyright © A. R. Norton, 2000.

Imam Hussein is a central and beloved figure in the Shi‘i imagination as an exemplar of courage, self-sacrifice, and compassion. When called by the people of Kufa in 680 c.e. (61 a.h.) to become their leader, Imam Hussein accepted the invitation and described his journey from Mecca as a mission to “restore my grandfather’s community of Muslims.” His decision to go to Kufa provoked a response from his adversary in Damascus, the ‘Umayyad Caliph Yazid, whose father Mu‘awiyya succeeded Caliph ‘Ali, Hussein’s father, as the putative ruler of all Muslims.

The lessons of religion are captured in the dramas and tragedies of its heroes. In the case of the Shi‘a, the main event in their history is the story of Hussein’s defeat and martyrdom, in 680 c.e., at the hands of Yazid’s massive army at Karbala, in what is now modern Iraq. Surrounded, outmanned, yet refusing to submit to Yazid’s authority and thereby surrender his claim to be the successor to the prophet Muhammad, Imam

Hussein's fate was sealed in a bloody confrontation lasting ten days on a blistering Iraqi plain. Hussein's martyrdom came on the tenth day of the first month of the Muslim calendar, Muharram—hence the use of the term 'Ashura, derived from the Arabic word for "tenth," to commemorate the event. The 'Ashura commemoration is shared by Shi'i Muslims around the world—in Afghanistan, Bahrain, Iran, India, Indonesia, Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, Europe, and North America, as well as in smaller communities in the Gulf and the Caribbean. 'Ashura is a time for reflection, worship, and mourning, and therefore weddings and other joyous events are not held during this period.

Hussein's sacrifice has special significance in recent history; its reinterpretation by Musa al-Sadr, Ruhollah Khomeini, 'Ali Shariati, and other leading figures of modern Shi'ism provided the revolutionary exemplar for both the overthrow of the shah in Iran and the mobilization of Shi'i Muslims in Lebanon. Hussein's martyrdom is presented as a model of courage, assertiveness, and self-help, and the modern interpretation of that event led to conclusions very similar to those arrived at by Catholic liberation theology: that people must not wallow in fatalism but must act to help themselves.

The detailed discussion in this chapter of the commemoration in Lebanon of Hussein's martyrdom provides a glimpse of a central aspect of Lebanese Shi'i society, as well as an appreciation of Hezbollah's largely successful efforts to shape Shi'a sensibilities for its own ends.

Ritual and Identity

Lebanon is a small country, roughly the size of Connecticut, but the venerable southern city of al-Nabatiya seems a continent away from the fussy lifestyles and bustling restaurants and cafes of cosmopolitan Beirut. The approximately sixty-minute drive from Beirut to al-Nabatiya is not just a departure from the capital's sensual delights but a sojourn to a part of the country that has lived in the vortex of conflict for more than three decades. Many Beiruti bon vivants are aghast at the prospect of making the southward trek.

Al-Nabatiya is a commercial center in Jabal 'Amil, the Shi'i heartland that extends from the *wadis*¹ and hills of southern Lebanon to the southern

Beqaa valley. Almost every weekend features a tidal flow of people from the overwhelmingly Shi‘i Muslim suburbs of Beirut southward as Shi‘a head to al-dai‘ah (“the hamlet”), which is usually taken to mean “going to the countryside,” where life is simple, wholesome, and unblemished by urban vices. Except in the bone-chilling, often icy winter in Jabal ‘Amil, when people stay in Beirut and its environs, hundreds of thousands of people move back and forth weekly. Unfortunately, from the 1960s through 2006 the flow often reversed as the people of the South sought refuge from bombardment and conflict with relatives in the comparative safety of the city.

Although the precise emergence of Shi‘ism in Jabal ‘Amil is in dispute, the community unquestionably predates the introduction of Shi‘ism to Persia (Iran) in the sixteenth century. Certainly Jabal ‘Amil was a center for scholarship as early as the late fourteenth century, and scholars from Jabal ‘Amil (as well as from Iraq and Bahrain) assisted in the installation of Shi‘i Islam in Safavid Persia. This was long before the Persian cities of Mashhad or Qum became major centers of Shi‘i scholarship. Jabal ‘Amil continues to be revered by Shi‘a although it has long been eclipsed by al-Najaf and Karbala in Iraq, the two great Iraqi shrine cities, and, since the nineteenth century, by the now famous Iranian cities of Shi‘i learning.

In Beirut, where members of Lebanon’s eighteen recognized sects work and often live cheek to jowl, religious practice and ritual are frequently tucked away from public view (for a list of all the sects, see [chapter 1](#), note 1). Lebanese are adept at discerning cues and clues that reveal an interlocutor’s confessional roots and cultural identity, but, at least until recent decades, public religious ritual was often spurned to avoid provoking sectarian tension. Although public and private mourning of Imam Hussein (‘azah al-Hussein) and the tragic events (*masa’ib*) of Karbala have long been observed in Shi‘i communities, public commemorations of ‘Ashura are relatively recent phenomena in *al-dahiya* (literally “the suburb,” the usual term for the densely populated southern suburbs of Beirut), where they began only in the second half of the twentieth century.

The practice of publicly mourning Imam Hussein (‘Ashura) was introduced to the Beirut suburbs by a migrant from Baalbek, al-Hajj Ahmed al-Khansa, after he made pilgrimages (*ziyarat*; literally, “visits”; singular, *ziyara*) in 1938 to al-Najaf and Karbala, where he witnessed a number of

public ceremonies during Muharram. On returning to Beirut, he instituted public mourning not simply as a display of communal piety but as a vehicle for mobilizing recent migrants to the city. Not surprisingly, longtime residents and well-established Shi'a resisted ostentatious commemorations of 'Ashura, which, they feared, might alienate their Christian neighbors who then controlled these areas politically (Khuri 1975). Hajj Ahmed built such a powerful foundation among the new urban residents that he eventually became a leading local politician.

In recent years, major public commemorations of 'Ashura take place in several parts of Lebanon, including al-dahiya; in the Beqaa valley, especially in the city of Baalbek; the southern coastal city of Tyre; and across Jabal 'Amil. As many as a quarter of a million people either participate in or watch the military-style 'Ashura parades organized by Hezbollah in al-dahiya. Much smaller, less tightly organized processions are held in Baalbek and in Tyre, with representation from various political and social organizations. Small-scale processions are conducted in villages and timed to precede larger commemorations in nearby towns and cities.

The most sensational commemorations are in al-Nabatiya, an overwhelmingly Shi'i city of thirty thousand people, where the event has a unique character. Public 'Ashura rituals had been repressed by the Ottomans until their defeat in 1918, but annual mourning processions became popular in the 1920s and featured self-flagellation and ritualized bleeding to mark the culmination of the Karbala tragedy.

Although the rituals of 'Ashura commemoration are often debated vigorously among Shi'i, with religious leaders continually attempting to prescribe "appropriate" ways of remembering 'Ashura, local practices vary widely and popular local customs blend in with Islamic traditions.

Among the Shi'a, commemorative ritual processions sometimes include flailing oneself with chains, metal whips, or swords or intentionally nicking the skin on the forehead to induce bleeding (*tatbir*), as well as the more common practice of rhythmically beating one's chest with a balled fist (*latam*). Of course, this is not to every Shi'i's taste, and some prefer quiet contemplation and prayer to public performance. Clerical disapproval has been strong; like many of his colleagues, the popular and respected (and al-Najaf born) Ayatollah Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah argued that the blood rituals of al-Nabatiya are improper pragmatically, as they put Shi'i Muslims

in a bad light in the eyes of non-Shi'a, but they also violated religious law that forbids Muslims to injure or kill themselves. He emphasized that the self-flagellation and similar rituals are "socially backward," even "reactionary." Instead, the events of Muharram must be understood as a model for an intellectual revolution. Similarly, the Ayatollah Muhammad Mahdi Shams al-Din, who until his death in 2001 was one of the most respected clerical voices among the Shi'a, urged that Imam Hussein's sacrifice be understood ethically and normatively, not simply as an occasion for demonstrative tears or sensational rituals (Shams al-Din 1985). Along similar lines, the Iranian leader 'Ali Khamenei issued a 1994 *fatwa* (an authoritative religious opinion; pl., *fatawa*) condemning the shedding of blood during Muharram rituals and underlining the negative image the rituals project. He argued that these rituals were not Islamic but the product of tradition. (Hezbollah has embraced Khamenei as the supreme Shi'i leader and has promoted his views.) Virtually every important Shi'i cleric, with few exceptions, has condemned and forbidden the practice in recent years and issued *fatawa* calling on Shi'a not to participate.

Still, predominantly male rituals of bloodletting of various sorts have proven remarkably resilient in the face of persistent clerical disapproval. Bleeding is an important aspect of the ritual for many—but by no means all—of the participants in Shi'i commemorations of 'Ashura in al-Nabatiya (although it is practiced in Shi'i communities in India, Iran, Iraq, and Pakistan, it is uncommon elsewhere in Lebanon). As one articulate enthusiast, an optometrist in al-Nabatiya, told me as we watched the spectacle in 2000, "What you see here is the real Islam. Islam is not found in books, it is here [in the ritual]." In addition to the label *tatbir*, the ritual is sometimes locally called *haidar*, meaning lion, a reference to Hussein's father Imam 'Ali, the son-in-law of the prophet who is revered for his wisdom. As men run through the streets, they sometimes simply chant "*haidar, haidar, haidar*" as they strike their foreheads with the open palm of their hands or occasionally with a blade.

From the first day of Muharram, black banners are draped on buildings and hung across the streets of al-Nabatiya, as they are throughout the Shi'i areas of Lebanon. (In contrast, when the author visited Tehran during 'Ashura 2004, such public signage was much less common.) The banners proclaim: "Everyone is calling for Hussein"; "Every day is Ashura and

every land is Karbala”; “Crying for Hussein is a victory of the oppressed over the oppressor”; and a variety of similar messages. Black pennants are fastened to power and light poles invoking “Hussein,” “the Awaited One,” “‘Abbas,” or “Haidar.”

During Muharram, entrepreneurs open roadside stands and impromptu ‘Ashura souvenir shops to sell recordings and books of readings from the saga of ‘Ashura and the killing (*al-maqtal*) of Hussein, as well as CDs of mourning lamentations, buttons, banners, paperweights, posters, and other keepsakes. A variety of clothing is offered, including T-shirts for youngsters and adults and baseball caps with ‘Ashura slogans. Many of these ‘Ashura mementos are manufactured in Iran and imported by enterprising Lebanese traders attracted by Iran’s bargain basement prices. Shi‘i men and women dress in subdued clothing, and many men wear black trousers and shirts to mark this period of ritual mourning. In addition, the two rival political organizations compete, handing out an array of scarves, vests, head and wristbands, caps, and pennants, all emblazoned with the logos of Amal or Hezbollah in distinctive color combinations (green, red, and white for Amal; black, red, and especially yellow for Hezbollah).

For the first ten days of the Muharram, daily readings in private homes and in Husseiniyas (centers for the observance of Hussein’s martyrdom) recall the drama and tragedy of Karbala (*masa’ib*; sing., *musiba*). The usual pattern in many villages and neighborhoods is to hold readings in one’s home or with neighbors, followed by an evening visit to the Husseiniya. (There are sometimes separate Husseiniyas for men and women, particularly in wealthier quarters or villages; if not, women retreat to a separate section of the men’s Husseiniya.) In these gatherings (*majalis*), skilled readers are often hired to relate the *masa’ib* and recite *alta’ziya*, the lamentations of mourning, which are also read in contemporary Lebanon to mourn the death of a loved one. The fate of Hussein and his followers is, of course, well known: all the men and boys will die, save Hussein’s infant son ‘Ali Zayn al-‘Abidin, who will carry on the imamate as the successor to the Prophet Muhammad, and the surviving women will suffer horrible humiliation and suffering at the hand of Yazid, Hussein’s triumphant rival. Listeners often respond with tears, and crying is *mustahabb* or commendable. A variety of Shi‘i sources include the succeeding Imams’ emphasis that the weeping for Hussein and his family is rewarded in the

hereafter, and that tears (and prayers) offered in this context will be rewarded at the Day of Judgment (Ayoub 1978). Readings often continue throughout the month, focusing especially on the tribulations of the women captives.

Zainab, Hussein's sister, is honored and discussed as a strong figure, an exemplar for women. Her endurance of suffering and her courage to speak truth to power when she was brought in captivity to the court of Yazid in Damascus is now understood as an archetype for women. Women usually gather separately from men in private homes or, as noted above, in a separate Husseinia.

In one prosperous village, just outside al-Nabatiya, a lovely women's Husseinia was built two decades ago by a wealthy resident who shared the consensus of the community that a women's Husseinia was the most important community need. The author asked a female doctor from Beirut, "Had there always been a women's Husseinia in the village?" She answered yes, but it used to be [switching to English] "shitty." Her comment illustrates the transformation in recent years among Lebanese Shi'i women, who now are much less inclined than in the past to derive a counsel of despair from 'Ashura. Just as the larger meaning of 'Ashura has changed in recent decades to encompass more activist interpretations, so Zainab's exemplar provides encouragement for Shi'i women to move decisively and courageously in society (Deeb 2006).

In contrast to other sites in Lebanon, the processions in al-Nabatiya last for two full days, encompassing both the ninth and tenth days of Muharram. Al-Nabatiya's population swells in Muharram as Shi'a from al-Nabatiya and southern Lebanon, and even from abroad, close in on the city to mark the event. Wealthy Shi'a who work abroad often bring their friends and relatives. Hajj Majid Rihan, a rich son of al-Nabatiya who lives and works in Gabon, in 2000 flew co-religionists from West Africa to Lebanon on a charter jet to take part in the rituals. Accurate attendance counts are always a challenge, but local authorities estimate that as many as fifty thousand people crowd into the city annually. Most participants have been Lebanese, but in recent years contingents of Shi'a have arrived from Iraq and Iran, though few Iranians have participated recently.

On the ninth and tenth days of Muharram, many hundreds of men, boys, and even infants, as well as a handful of young women, embrace the

suffering of Imam Hussein by shedding their blood in memory of his martyrdom. Since the 1990s several public health organizations, as well as Hezbollah, have called upon people to make blood donations rather than inflict bleeding upon themselves, and a blood collection station enjoyed a steady clientele. It is not uncommon for *darribeen* (those who strike themselves) to bleed ritually and also donate blood, and even female workers at the blood donor station sometimes join the ritual.

The Intersection of Ritual and Politics

‘Ashura is not merely the grassroots practice of religion. It is also a political event, an opportunity for the rival Amal movement and Hezbollah to show their strength and demonstrate their solidarity. When the author observed the event in March 2000, just two months before the Israeli withdrawal from the “security zone,” enthusiastic Amal supporters, many from southern Lebanese villages, were everywhere in evidence, but Hezbollah also enjoyed a strong core of support in the town, which was reinforced four years later when the party triumphed in municipal elections in al-Nabatiya (more on this in [chapter 5](#)). In 2000 both groups were well represented in the parades or processions on both days, and thousands of others were spectators. Whereas the Amal marchers seemed to be loosely organized but not unruly, Hezbollah members marched with military precision and organized effective cordons for crowd control. The contrast between the loosely organized, populist Amal and the tightly disciplined Hezbollah was quite obvious. Both groups marshaled men, women, and children for their processions, and the numerous children were organized by age or school grade, although the Hezbollah groups were by far more regimented. Even women with babies in their arms or pushing baby strollers were enlisted to march.

The Lebanese army and police are usually much in evidence, and sometimes confrontations erupt with a political flavor. At one point, in 2000, the army fired a few shots in the air to disperse some shoving matches between participants, whose adrenaline had gotten the better of their good judgment. The same year a van carrying men from a pro-Amal village was turned away from the entrance to al-Nabatiya when soldiers

discovered that the men were armed; an altercation followed in which an army officer was punched, but the soldiers prevailed.



3.1 Members of the Amal movement participating in the bleeding ritual, which is a popular religious ritual in southern Lebanon, and one that is condemned by many clerics and dismissed as a folk ritual by Hezbollah. Copyright © A. R. Norton, 2000.

More serious clashes occurred in 2002, when sixty people were injured and dozens of cars damaged in melees involving angry Amal and Hezbollah members. The Amalists charged that the Hezbollah parade ran overtime and delayed their own processions (*masirat*) by an hour. Hezbollah boycotted al-Nabatiya in 2003, and its television channel, al-Manar, did not cover the *tatbir* ritual the next year.

Notwithstanding the clashes between rival hotheads, the mood is usually friendly and welcoming. The public commemoration actually occupies two days, in contrast to all the other Shi'i locales in Lebanon. On *al-tasu'a*—the ninth day of Muharram—there are dozens of processions of *darribeen* as people begin to gather in al-Nabatiya. Despite the heavy stench of blood, particularly on 'Ashura—the tenth day—visitors often

remark on a carnival-like atmosphere. After participating in the processions, *shabaab*, or young men, casually walk the street showing off their blood-splattered clothes as testimony to their fidelity to Shi'ism and to their bravado. Teenaged girls enjoy themselves, sometimes ogling their male contemporaries and, of course, giggling. A handful of young women participate in the bloodletting, but they usually number no more than a few dozen at most. Street vendors sell snacks and drinks, but many people purchase cases of juice and water that they dispense to anyone wishing to quench his or her thirst. Local restaurant owners cook dozens of sheep that they donate to feed hundreds of people.



3.2 In this part of the dramatic reenactment of the events of Karbala in 680 ce, Hussein's half-brother 'Abbas, a famous warrior clad here in white, is fighting the enemy. Copyright © A. R. Norton, 2000.



3.3 Four young women from southern Lebanon enjoying the holiday spectacle of 'Ashura in al-Nabatiya. Copyright © A. R. Norton, 2000.

Perhaps most important, 'Ashura is a family holiday and an occasion for reunions and feasts. It is also the occasion for special foods, and some of the faithful work late into the night preparing tens of kilos of food for free distribution. Women spend days preparing particular foods associated with 'Ashura. The most common is *harisa*, which is made by soaking and softening wheat overnight and then cooking it three or four hours before adding shredded chicken to the pudding-like product. The *harisa* is seasoned with cinnamon and cloves, and then offered to family and visitors or even passersby. In other Arab countries, such as Iraq, *harisa* is sweetened. *Qima*, a less commonly prepared dish from al-Najaf in Iraq, features chickpeas, tomatoes, and cooked red meat, which some see as symbolizing the blood sacrifice of Hussein and his followers.

Participating in the bleeding ritual is an individual choice, although the parents of many young boys clearly encourage them to take part. Many of the participants start out at the Husseiniya, where a heaving crowd of thousands gather. Using a straight razor, or *mouss*, and deft flicks of the wrist, an obliging barber inflicts shallow cuts on the upper forehead. One or

two suffices to cause some bleeding, but some participants wish to bleed more demonstrably and so they will have five, ten, or even more cuts made or do it themselves. (Health-conscious, middle-class *darribeen* bring their own razors, which can be purchased inexpensively for about a dollar.) Participants then join a group and follow a prescribed route past the *baidar*, or field, where the ‘Ashura events are dramatized, and then around the main streets of the town, culminating at the Husseinia.

“Everyone has their own Hussein,” notes Ali Safa, a respected professor in Beirut whose natal village is nearby. Some people have participated in the ritual all their lives and cannot imagine missing it. Others do so to fulfill a *nidhir*, or pledge. Ra’ed Moukalled is a local optometrist who lost a son, Ahmad, in 1999, during a picnic the day before his fifth birthday; the boy had picked up what looked like a toy but was an unexploded cluster bomb dropped by Israel. Ra’ed participates in the ritual annually in tribute to his deceased son, and his friends join him to show their support and to share in his personal tragedy. Ra’ed has also been a civic leader actively involved in efforts to work with international nongovernmental organizations to clear cluster bombs and mines from southern Lebanon. Even a few Christians get involved in the Hussein ritual, either out of community spirit or to fulfill their own pledge, perhaps to mark the recovery of an ill relative or a reversal of family fortunes.

The mood of the bloodletting rituals is infectious and often onlookers impulsively join the bloodletting. This author has seen a couple of Lebanese policemen and soldiers do just that, slipping on a civilian shirt and returning to don their uniform with a blood-stained bandage secure on their forehead. Aid stations do a robust business, applying bandages and reviving those who have fainted from heat exhaustion or loss of blood. In winter or early spring the weather is usually comfortable, but when ‘Ashura falls in the hot months of summer the heat and dehydration claim many more casualties. Nonetheless, no deaths from the ritual have been reported.

The dramatization of ‘Ashura, the *timthiliyya* (a play or performance), takes place on a *baidar*, or field, in front of the city’s large Husseinia. The rendition of the *timthiliyya* often lasts more than three hours. Thousands of people crowd around the field or on the roofs of neighboring buildings to watch the event. In 2000 Yazid’s soldiers wore lurid fluorescent costumes in yellow and orange, whereas Hussein’s somber troupe decamped at a green-

rimmed tent after entering the field on camels and parading before the crowd. A large Islamic standard waves to mark the camp of the prophet's grandson. A narrator reads a script, but the players themselves, Hussein as well, often recite their lines, much to the displeasure of some clerics. One such cleric, Shaikh Qabalan, disapproves of the entire play, strongly objecting to the idea that any person could portray Hussein.



3.4 Hezbollah members participating in an 'Ashura procession in southern Lebanon. Posters depict Raghib Harb (in the foreground), the popular Hezbollah leader assassinated in 1984, and Musa al-Sadr, the Iranian of Lebanese descent who founded the Shi'i movement in Lebanon. Copyright © A. R. Norton, 2000.

Historically, on the seventh day of Muharram, Hussein's group was cut off from water, and heroic battles were fought to reach the Euphrates River, in this reenactment a small concrete pond. As the replay of history continues, Hussein's half-brother, 'Abbas, a brilliant warrior and Hussein's standard-bearer, succeeds in reaching the water twice. The first time, never taking a sip himself, he watches helplessly as the hard-won water spills onto the sand, and thirsty and anxious children attempt to open the leather water

bag. The second time he fails to return. ‘Abbas fights fiercely, and is only defeated when both his hands are severed at the wrists. The *kifaf* ‘Abbas, literally the palms of ‘Abbas, are a central motif in parade floats and displays throughout the day.

The drama takes its toll on the crowd; a number of women faint, exhausted by the emotion-wrenching play and fatigued from standing in place for hours. At particularly poignant moments, such as the death of Hussein’s son, Ali al-Akbar, who is said to have resembled his great-grandfather Muhammad, women are sobbing loudly. The death of an infant in Hussein’s arms evokes a similar chorus of sobs. The play is punctuated by long soliloquies from Hussein and by his entreaties to the enemy. He offers to withdraw from Karbala but refuses to pay homage to Yazid; hence his fate is cast. Imam Hussein reflects on injustice, on the price of loyalty to Islam, on the need to confront our own death bravely, to sacrifice our own flesh and blood in order to see Allah. He is the last man to die, slain while badly wounded and in prayer. His severed head is carried to Damascus in tribute to Yazid, and his body is trampled along with the corpses of his followers by the enemy horsemen. The women of his band are marched off into misery. Variants of the *timthiliyya* are performed annually, and lessons of the tragedy are not lost on the rapt audience.

In 1983, just as the drama was being performed and groups of blood-splattered celebrants were milling about in front of the Husseiniya, an armed Israeli patrol of several trucks suddenly appeared and attempted to crash through the crowds. The incident was caused when an Israeli lieutenant who had been ordered to avoid the town on ‘Ashura misread his map and took the wrong road. The scene is easy enough to imagine, as the occupiers were instantly seen in the role of Yazid. The crowd threw stones and the Israelis responded with rifles and grenades, killing several Shi‘a. The incident was a turning point in the resistance to Israel’s occupation, especially as it spurred many previous fence-sitters to join the resistance. In Lebanon’s Shi‘i community the 1983 incident is intrinsic to a commonly shared narrative emphasizing Israel’s disrespect for Islam and the injustice of the long Israeli occupation.

Another event still talked about is the 1996 massacre in Qana, the southern Lebanese town where more than a hundred people were killed in the Israeli shelling of the UNIFIL base (more on this in [chapter 4](#)). Floats in

the Muharram parade often recall the massacre, emphasizing anti-Israel themes and memorializing the resistance. Individuals frequently make the same connection that was so easily made by the crowds in 1983—that the Israeli occupiers are the modern incarnation of Yazid. In contrast to the tragedy that befell Hussein, however, this time the Shi‘a, having learned from Karbala, will confront and defeat Yazid.

Until recent decades the rituals of Muharram in Lebanon had taught quiescence and reified and affirmed the status quo. Half a century ago the renowned anthropologist Emyrs Peters studied a Shi‘i village in Jabal ‘Amil, where he found that the play, the *timthiliyya*, was a conservative device for sustaining an existing order, not challenging it.

What the Play did was to give the vast audience a glimpse of the kind of world they could anticipate when evil triumphs. What was depicted was a world of madness, a world of complete unreason, a world without order of any sort. It did not depict a revolutionary situation of one group supplanting another—indeed, the peasantry could never supplant the Learned Families in this sense, for the peasants are far too numerous. What it showed was the chaos that would result if the Learned Families lost their control of village affairs (Peters 1970).

Contemporary ‘Ashura rituals, however, exemplify, and indeed encourage, a heightened and widespread sense of politicization. The ceremonies are an occasion for competing political organizations to perform contending variations of the ritual in order to exemplify piety and mobilize support. In this sense, the rituals offer no less than a public performance of ideology, with, for example, rituals explicitly casting Israel in the role of Caliph Yazid, the Umayyad ruler responsible for Imam Hussein’s martyrdom. Lebanese politicians in the Amal and Hezbollah organizations work hard to harness these sentiments to their advantage, often with impressive success. A striking illustration of this in recent years is the televised addresses by Hezbollah’s current secretary-general, al-Sayyid Hasan Nasrallah, during the first ten days of Muharram, which are viewed attentively by multitudes. Nasrallah is a popular and often riveting speaker, and his nightly Muharram sermons often probe the “real meaning” of

‘Ashura, analyzing why death is not to be feared and offering an explicit political commentary. His sermons routinely have two parts, one more or less religious and the other political, in which he routinely castigates the United States for its policies in the Middle East and sometimes comments more generally on U.S. affairs. In February 2005 he emphasized the inherent justice of Hezbollah’s cause, inspired as it was by the Imam Hussein’s quest, and he railed against depictions of the party as a “terrorist” group. At other times the talks during the month of Muharram are used to offer a social critique, as in March 2000, when one of Nasrallah’s sermons scathingly assessed the social ills of the United States in order to dampen the dreams of many Shi’a to immigrate there.

Prior to Israel’s May 2000 unilateral withdrawal of its occupation forces from southern Lebanon, Nasrallah’s Muharram sermons were major political statements, listened to carefully by a wide audience of apprehensive Lebanese for hints about whether chaos or order would follow Israel’s impending withdrawal. He astutely anticipated that there would be little disorder. Whatever one thinks about his views, Nasrallah also exploited the occasion of Muharram to further legitimate Hezbollah as a social and political force among the Shi’a. The party benefited from a wave of support for its leading role in fighting Israel and creating the pressure that prompted Israel’s withdrawal. In contrast to Lebanon’s elected political leaders, who seemed thoroughly flummoxed by Israel’s declared intention to leave southern Lebanon, with or without an agreement with Syria, Nasrallah projected a tough, clearheaded image.

¹ A *wadi* is a dry streambed that swells with winter and spring rains and often becomes lush with vegetation until it dries up in the parching heat of summer.

Chapter 4

Resistance, Terrorism, and Violence in Lebanon

The 1980s was a decade of extraordinary violence and chaos in Lebanon, often remembered in the United States with indelible images of the ruins of the U.S. marine barracks obliterated by a suicide bomber on a Sunday morning in October 1983. The lives of 220 marines, 18 sailors, and 3 soldiers, in addition to the wife and four children of a Lebanese janitor, were snuffed out in the attack. Simultaneously 58 French paratroopers were killed by a second bombladen truck. The French, like the Americans, were participants in the Multinational Force (MNF) that had been dispatched to Beirut to bring stability to Lebanon in the wake of the June 1982 Israeli invasion of that country. Israel's goals were twofold: to destroy the PLO as an important political force and to install a friendly government in Beirut. The MNF's involvement began that summer after the retreat of most armed Palestinian guerrillas from Lebanon by ship and land. More than three hundred thousand Palestinians remained, most of them refugees or descendants of refugees from the first Palestinian war of 1948–49. After the catastrophic suicide bombings of October 1983, the marines, to use Ronald Reagan's word, "redeployed" by early 1984, and the MNF ceased to exist.



Two Shi'i participants in 'Ashura processions in al-Nabatiya. Both wear headbands honoring the Imam Hussein as the leader of martyrs. Copyright © A. R. Norton, 2000.

There is little question that the attacks were carried out by Lebanese Shi'i militants, under Iranian direction. A blue-ribbon investigating commission established by the American government and headed by retired admiral Robert L. J. Long described the October bombing as an "act of war" and found Iran largely responsible. Iran is also widely believed to be responsible for the earlier suicide bombing and decimation of the U.S. Embassy in Beirut in April 1983. The oft-unnoticed precedent for the 1983 attacks was established in mid-December 1981, when the Iraqi Embassy in Beirut was leveled by a suicide bomber. The Iraqi al-Da'wa party claimed credit for the attack, citing Iraq's invasion of Iran in September 1980.

Lebanon, porous to outside influence and militarily weak, had long been the site for proxy wars, and this was especially the case in the 1980s, with war materials supplied by rival political and military sponsors, including Iraq, Iran, Syria, Libya, Israel, the United States, France, Saudi Arabia, and the Soviet Union. Among the contestants for power, Syria and Iran played key roles, though not always in cooperation with each other. Although

Damascus and Tehran shared an interest in thwarting U.S. influence in Lebanon and defeating Israel's occupation of the country, throughout the decade Syria revealed great suspicion of Iran and its protégé, Hezbollah. Early in the 1980s Hezbollah existed less as a concrete organization than as a cat's paw of Iran. As Hezbollah's strength grew over the course of the decade, Syria periodically tried to contain it, most dramatically when the al-Asad regime killed twenty-three Hezbollah members in 1987. Syria also provided in 1988 and 1989 support to Amal in that rival Shi'a organization's ferocious battles with Hezbollah. Four years earlier, in 1985, Syria also provided material support for Amal's "war of the camps," a three-year campaign to eliminate the power base of Palestinian militants in the refugee camps surrounding Beirut. Although Amal imposed great suffering on Palestinians in the camps, the armed Palestinian militants were never fully subdued, largely because Hezbollah gave them extensive support. Whereas many Amal members were hostile to the Palestinian guerrillas for their abusive behavior in southern Lebanon, Hezbollah supported them on principle. The revered Shi'a religious authority Ayatollah Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah backed Hezbollah's position and condemned the Amal campaign. Because of this crucial clerical approval, and despite Syrian opposition, Hezbollah won increasing support among the local Shi'a. By 1990 the organization had largely supplanted Amal in the environs of Beirut.

Lebanon became infamous, in the 1980s, for the kidnapping of Westerners, thirty in all, most of whom were hapless innocents snared at a time of venomous xenophobia. Kidnapping for vengeance, politics, or profit was a well-practiced craft throughout the civil war. After the Israeli invasion in June 1982, however, the first foreigners kidnapped were not Westerners but four Iranian diplomats snatched by the Maronite Lebanese Forces militia and subsequently murdered. The string of Western hostages began in 1982 with David Dodge, the president of the American University of Beirut (AUB), who was held for a year, including some time in Iran. The Dodge kidnapping was apparently intended as a rejoinder to the disappearance of the four Iranians, as well as to strike a blow at the most obvious and well-known symbol of America's connection to Lebanon, namely, the AUB.

There was no “kidnapping-central” but a cabal of militants, some certainly linked to Hezbollah, others in various other gangs and groups, including some that were in the hostage business, selling and trading hostages for profit (a phenomenon that presaged similar criminal activities in Iraq). The UN official who played the lead role in many of the hostage negotiations was Giandominico Picco, whose memoir, *Man without a Gun* (Random House, 1999), leaves little doubt that Syria had almost no influence over the kidnappers, and Iran’s leverage was operationally limited.

Although Iran did not exercise direct control of the kidnappings, its revolutionary regime did exert strong ideological influence and was particularly effective at sowing the suspicion that Westerners in Lebanon were agents for imperialist Americans and Israelis. The hostage seizures were fully consistent with Hezbollah’s declared goal of expunging America from Lebanon, its citizens as well as its diplomatic presence. Western hostages were held in Lebanon in despicable conditions, often alone and chained to radiators for months on end, denied even the slightest dignity. The longest held was Terry Anderson, a reporter for the Associated Press, who spent seven long years as a hostage. CIA Station Chief William Buckley died in captivity after being brutally interrogated and tortured. The hostages’ fate was often manipulated to serve the interests of Hezbollah’s sponsor, Iran. Lebanon became so dangerous for Americans that, in 1987, the State Department banned the use of U.S. passports for travel to the country, a ban that was not lifted until 1997 (although tens of thousands of Americans ignored the ban in the 1990s after the civil war ended and simply avoided having their passports stamped).

The hostage crisis gave rise to “Iran-Contra,” the 1986 scandal that revealed the willingness of then U.S. president Ronald Reagan to trade arms to Iran in return for the freeing of hostages. The hostage releases made possible by these deals were shortly followed by the snatching of others, and four more years would pass before the hostage era ended in Lebanon. Unquestionably, Iran exploited the hostages to serve its interests. Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Hossein Sheikholeslam confirmed Iran’s stake, when, in 1988, he expressed his hope that “the hostage situation would be resolved in a way that serves the objectives for which they were kidnapped” (Chehabi 2006, 228).

Lebanon was a cockpit for violence and a breeding ground for terrorism in the 1980s, but endemic violence began to ebb as the civil war ended in 1989 and 1990. Simultaneously, Syria tightened its control over Lebanon with the implicit consent of the U.S., which rewarded Syria's symbolic participation in the 1990–91 Gulf War coalition against Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. In the South, however, Israel's occupation continued to provoke resistance, not least by Hezbollah. Before turning to a fuller examination of the situation in southern Lebanon in the course of the 1990s, we should pause to reflect more generally on the relationship between terrorism and political violence.

Hezbollah and Terrorism

Can all of Hezbollah's military activity be classified as terrorism? U.S. and Israeli policymakers certainly think so, and they have defined Hezbollah as a terrorist organization. Anyone supporting Hezbollah is supporting a terrorist group. By definition, any act of violence that it commits or seeks to commit is an act of terrorism, and so there are no gray areas of justifiable behavior in which terrorists may lurk. Whether for law enforcement officials, spies, or soldiers, the issue is assumed to be settled.

"Terrorist" is a useful rhetorical bludgeon that many states have wielded to outlaw or dehumanize radical or revolutionary groups. Thus, throughout the 1970s and 1980s, before Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization signed the Oslo Accords, almost any mention of the PLO included the description "terrorist," and any Israeli aerial bombing of the PLO, which was in those days a major armed presence in Lebanon, was an attack on terrorist targets, according to Israeli spokespersons and journalists.

Following the attacks on New York City and the Pentagon by al-Qaeda on September 11, 2001, President George W. Bush signed Executive Order 13224 specifying a series of steps that were to be taken to combat al-Qaeda and its affiliates and resources. The groups described in that executive order as terrorists of "global reach" did not include Hezbollah, even though the U.S. Department of State, in 1997, had labeled it a "foreign terrorist organization." Nor was the Palestinian Islamist group Hamas included, even

though it, too, had long been included in the State Department's terrorist list.

These omissions prompted a lively debate, with pro-Israeli lobbying groups—particularly the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee, the influential Washingtonbased group that describes itself as “America’s pro-Israel lobby,” as well as a number of members of Congress—arguing strenuously for including Hezbollah and Hamas in the terms of the executive order. Many officials resisted the move, arguing that America’s focus should be on al-Qaeda, the group responsible for the 9/11 attacks, and noting that the U.S. would need the support of many Arab states that recognize Hamas and Hezbollah as bona fide resistance groups. Although leading figures in the Bush administration, notably Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, maintained that the additional designation was unnecessary and redundant, the administration amended the executive order to include Hezbollah and other groups as enemies in the “war against terrorism.” In Israel, the government of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon moved quickly in the days following 9/11 to associate Israel with America’s war on terrorism, thereby gaining further leverage against Israel’s enemies.

Terrorism can be defined as the intentional use of political violence against civilians and civilian sites such as schools, hospitals, restaurants, buses, trains, or planes. Putting aside for the moment that Hezbollah promotes activities and performs services in Lebanon that have nothing to do with terrorism, such as running hospitals, the organization has engaged in forms of violence that fall outside the rubric of terrorism as it is generally understood. Most notably, so long as Israel was occupying a significant area of Lebanon, there is no doubt that Hezbollah and other Lebanese groups were fully within their rights to resist the occupation forces and to do so with deadly violence. That the resistance usually restricted its attacks to enemy soldiers and the enemy’s proxy forces only reinforced their firm normative footing. The United States has not succeeded in convincing most European states to endorse its blanket designation of Hezbollah as “terrorist” primarily because many of those states insist on a more precise conception of terrorism than the U.S. habitually employs. Of course, once Israel withdrew unilaterally from Lebanon, in 2000, Hezbollah found itself on far weaker normative ground.

Also, there is no question that Hezbollah has engaged in acts that do, indeed, constitute terrorism in its more precise and generally understood sense. One such clear instance was the 1985 skyjacking, by two Hezbollah operatives, of TWA flight 847, en route from Athens to Rome. Robert Stethem, a U.S. sailor on leave and traveling on the flight, was mercilessly beaten and shot in the head. The hijackers, Muhammad ‘Ali Hammadi and Hasan Izz al-Din, who remain close to the top of the FBI’s “wanted list,” disgracefully dumped his body on the tarmac of Beirut airport. Another clear-cut case, cited previously in [chapter 2](#), was the 1988 kidnapping of Lieutenant Colonel William R. Higgins of the U.S. Marines, an unarmed UN observer who was tortured and murdered by the Believers’ Resistance, a group sympathetic to Hezbollah.

It is generally easier to trace much of the terrorism of the 1980s and early 1990s to Iran than to Hezbollah. Iran murdered a variety of regime opponents during this time, including Shapur Bakhtiar, the last prime minister of the Pahlavi dynasty that had been overthrown in 1979, as well as members of the Pahlavi family and other former officials of the toppled regime. Especially at risk were Kurdish nationalists, who advocated greater autonomy or independence for the Kurdish minority in Iran. After the killing of four Kurds in a Greek restaurant in Berlin, an Iranian intelligence official boasted that a blow had been struck at the Kurdish opposition. An Iranian official and three Lebanese were convicted in a 1997 trial of the Berlin assassinations, and four other Iranian officials who were judged responsible, in absentia, included the supreme leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei, and President Rafsanjani. The evidence of Iranian complicity in many of these attacks is clear to any impartial observer. The extent of Hezbollah’s involvement, however, is murkier. Robert Baer, a former CIA agent with extensive experience in Lebanon and in the Middle East, has argued that Hezbollah was not involved: “It’s not that Hezbollah is doing the terrorism out of Lebanon. They didn’t do the US Embassy in 1983 or the Marines. It was the Iranians. It’s a political issue [in the U.S.] because the Israelis want the Americans to go after Hezbollah” (*Christian Science Monitor*, July 7, 2003). Although Baer’s conclusions are accurate for many of the attacks in Europe during this period, in other instances Hezbollah’s role is more clearly indicated. Following Israel’s 1992 assassination of Hezbollah Secretary-General ‘Abbas al-Musawi, two terrorist attacks occurred in

Argentina that many knowledgeable observers believe were the joint work of Iran and Hezbollah's external security organization, which apparently operates autonomously from the party and is widely believed to be closely linked to Iranian intelligence. The first attack, within months of al-Musawi's murder, was the detonation of a large bomb under the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires, killing twenty-nine people. The Argentinean authorities issued an arrest warrant for Hezbollah operative Imad Mughniyah, who directed the hijacking of TWA flight 847 in 1985 and was believed to have regularly collaborated with Iran in acts of terrorism.

The second attack, in 1994, was the result of a bombladen van driven into the Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina in Buenos Aires, killing eighty-five people, most of them Jews. The suicide bomber was allegedly Hezbollah member Ibrahim Hussein Berro, but Hezbollah claims that he died later in southern Lebanon in a resistance operation. The former Iranian ambassador to Argentina Hade Soleimanpour was later briefly arrested in Britain but was released for lack of evidence. Then, in November 2006, warrants were issued for the arrest of former Iranian president Hashemi Rafsanjani and eight other former Iranian officials, including the ex-foreign minister Ali-Akbar Velayati.

Occupation in Southern Lebanon

Israel's occupation of southern Lebanon spanned more than two decades and rendered Hezbollah's ideology persuasive to many Shi'a in the region. Israel's military involvement in the South began in 1978 with its "Litani Operation," intended to push Palestinian guerrillas north of the Litani River. The invasion left important pockets of armed Palestinian strength intact, but it provided a context for creating a border "security zone" under the nominal control of a proxy militia led initially by the volatile, renegade Lebanese army major Sa'ad Haddad. Despite the terms of UN Security Resolution 425, passed in 1978 with heavy U.S. support and calling for the withdrawal of Israeli forces and the restoration of Lebanese sovereignty, Israel sustained this security zone for the next twenty-two years until unilaterally withdrawing in 2000. By that time Hezbollah had, indisputably, become both Israel's nemesis and a central fixture among Shi'a in southern Lebanon.

Within months of Israel's June 1982 invasion, when it became clear that Israel had no intention of disengaging from Lebanon anytime soon, a variety of groups across the political spectrum began to organize attacks against the Israeli occupation forces. These included factions of the Ba'ath and Communist parties, Nasserist organizations, and other secular nationalist groups. By the 1990s, however, Hezbollah was carrying out most of the attacks, each appearing to have been characterized by careful planning and well-practiced professionalism. Its first post-invasion operation, and one of its deadliest, was mounted in November 1982 in the southern city of Tyre. Hezbollah member Shaikh Ahmad Qasir drove a bombladen car into an Israeli headquarters and intelligence center. At least seventy-five Israeli officials and soldiers were killed, along with fourteen Arab prisoners. The attack was so unexpected that Israel did not even know initially how it had happened and for years persisted in saying that the explosion was caused by a "gas leakage."¹

The Tyre attack, in fact, was one of twelve "self-martyrdom missions" (in Hezbollah parlance) mounted by Hezbollah members. This was less than one-third of all the suicide attacks. The other suicide missions were launched by Amal and various secular nationalist groups all intent on ending Israel's occupation. This distribution of suicide missions between secular and Islamist-leaning groups illustrates that the tactic of mounting suicide attacks was motivated more often by nationalist and patriotic impulses than by religious inspiration.

The turning point in the resistance was the 1983 al-Nabatiya incident described in the previous chapter, when an Israeli army patrol blundered into the middle of the town during a mass procession on 'Ashura and opened fire in an attempt to disperse the crowd. From that time on there would be no fence-sitting. By 1984 the pace of attacks was so intense that an Israeli soldier was dying every third day.

In 1985 Israel hunkered down in an enlarged border zone comprising some 10 percent of all Lebanese territory, for which the Israelis used the euphemism "security zone." Israel asserted that it would abide by UN Resolution 425, calling for unconditional Israeli withdrawal only after the security situation improved. In reality, this was an *insecurity* zone that became an argument for continuing occupation. If the situation in the South quieted, as it did periodically, Israeli officials held up the zone as a success

that could not be safely terminated. When the situation became hotter, the zone became a necessity. Effectively the zone was an impetus to violence.

Hezbollah officials, meanwhile, frequently claimed that, without effective Shi'i resistance to the occupation, Israel would have little incentive to consider withdrawing—a view widely shared in Lebanon. The converse proposition—that a cessation of resistance activities would induce Israel to withdraw—was often dismissed as laughably improbable, and not just by members of Hezbollah.

Neighboring Syria viewed the southern Lebanon situation as a fundamental strategic concern. To the extent that Israel held sway in the area, Syria's Lebanese flank was further exposed to an Israeli attack. Equally important, Syria insisted on firmly linking the fate of the South with that of the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. When the Lebanese government tried to break that linkage in 1983, in the course of peace negotiations brokered by U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz, Damascus sabotaged the draft agreement. The May 17 agreement of 1983 would have ceded southern Lebanon to de facto Israeli control in return for a formal Israeli military withdrawal. But the agreement contained a secret U.S.-Israeli provision in which the U.S. promised that the agreement would not be implemented without Syrian assent, which was not forthcoming. As Syria tightened its power grip in Lebanon, Lebanese officials repeatedly emphasized that the South was captive to Israeli-Syrian negotiations. A decade later, in 1993, when Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri tried to break the linkage, he was quickly yanked back in line. Hezbollah, meanwhile, backed Syria's contention that the prospect of a separate Lebanese deal with Israel was the route of weakness and would subordinate Lebanon to Israeli interests.

Hezbollah developed its own relations with various Palestinian groups, based in Lebanon, Palestine, and elsewhere. Fostering these ties was Israel's expulsion of four hundred alleged Palestinian militants to southern Lebanon in 1992. The Lebanese government forced the expelled Palestinians to stay in a contained area in the South that became, as many Palestinians later called it, "Hezbollah University," where Hezbollah indoctrinated its "students" in its perspective on resistance. Although many of the Palestinians were eventually allowed to return home, the ties built during that period have been largely sustained at Israel's cost.

Generally the Lebanese strongly resist the *tawtin*, or “naturalization,” of its resident population of over four hundred and sixty thousand registered Palestinian refugees (although UN officials believe the actual number resident in Lebanon to be over two hundred thousand, since many Palestinians have left for economic reasons). The Lebanese fear that integrating these refugees would destabilize Lebanon’s delicate political balance, and they also bitterly recollect the Palestinian state-within-a-state that existed for more than a decade (until Israel’s 1982 invasion). Most of the refugees have roots in Haifa and the villages of the Galilee, areas that are now very much part of the state of Israel. Although their camps were nominally disarmed in 1991, significant arms caches remain, and camps like ‘Ain al-Hilwah, near Saida, are strongholds that the Lebanese army skirts. A number of armed Palestinian factions reportedly maintain cooperative relations with Hezbollah.

The civil war came to a close in Lebanon by the early 1990s, when all the militias, except Hezbollah, agreed to disband in accordance with the 1989 Ta’if accord. Hezbollah, which signed on to the accord only after the Iranian government gave its blessing, justified the maintenance of its armed forces by calling them “Islamic resistance” groups, not militias, committed to ending Israel’s occupation. The forces were said to be needed to defend the country against the Israel-sponsored SLA (South Lebanon Army). This position enjoyed wide, though not unanimous, support in Lebanon, where the Israeli occupation was seen as an impediment to the country’s recovery.

The “Rules of the Game”

Practical “rules of the game” emerged, during the 1990s, between Hezbollah-led resistance forces versus the Israelis and their proxy, the SLA. Israel would not attack civilian targets in Lebanon, and the resistance would focus its actions on the Security Zone (Sobelman 2004). This *modus vivendi* was clearly articulated in an oral agreement in 1993 following Israel’s “Operation Accountability,” launched in July of that year. The 1993 agreement led to a temporary reduction in the intensity of violence and reprisal. But in 1996, after Hezbollah fired katyusha rockets into Israel in retaliation for the killing of Lebanese civilians, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) again launched a major campaign into Lebanon. “Operation Grapes

of Wrath,” initiated in April of that year, was intended to undermine popular support for Hezbollah among the Lebanese, as well as to prompt Syria to rein in the organization. The strategy failed, largely as a result of the horrible slaughter at Qana, an ancient village some locals like to claim as the town cited in the Bible where Jesus turned water to wine (John 2:1–11). (In fact, the actual site is probably Cana in the Galilee region.) At the UN base in Qana—a protected zone in international law—civilians sought refuge from IDF air and ground attacks. But rather than finding safety, 106 civilians were killed by Israeli artillery. Authoritative reports by the UN and Amnesty International challenged Israeli claims that the shelling of the UN base was unintentional, and these findings are well known in Lebanon.² However, the report of the UN Secretary-General’s military adviser demonstrated that the Israeli shelling of the UNIFIL site was not accidental, and the thirteen shells that fell on the compound exploded where they had been aimed.

No incident in recent memory has inspired more hatred for the Jewish state than the Qana attack. Close to the UN base, a memorial cemetery has been created where the victims are buried, and the site has become a popular memorial for many Lebanese to visit. Among middle-class professionals in al-dahiya, trips to Qana, usually with children in tow, are now common and have taken on the aspects of ritual. The site is festooned with banners (most in Arabic) accusing Israel of terrorism and genocide and invoking sayings by some of the central figures in Shi‘ism, such as Imam Hussein. Many of the banners emphasize the loss of innocent blood and demand vengeance. One sign reads: “Qana is the Karbala [the site of Hussein’s martyrdom in the year 680 c.e.; see [chapter 3](#)] of the twentieth century; it is a land made holy by the Lord Jesus and contaminated by the Zionist Satan (enemy of God).”

As CNN broadcast horrific pictures of mangled and burned civilians in the wake of this massacre, then U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher succeeded in persuading all sides to abide once again by the same rules that had been in place since 1993. This time, however, the agreement was committed to an unsigned piece of paper. A noteworthy point is that in the course of negotiations Israel never challenged the right of Hezbollah to attack its soldiers in Lebanon, thus tacitly conceding that the IDF was an occupation force in the country. The April understanding brokered by

Secretary Christopher specified that armed groups would not launch attacks against Israeli territory; Israel and its allies would not bombard civilians or civilian targets; both sides would commit themselves to avoid attacking civilians and launching attacks from civilian areas; and nothing in the agreement would prevent the right to self-defense. The agreement also provided for a monitoring group of the United States, France, Lebanon, Syria, and Israel to oversee the implementation of the agreement and to receive complaints of violations. The group would operate on the basis of unanimity and be based at Naqura, a southern coastal village and the site of an old customs house now used as the UNIFIL headquarters. From 1996 to 2000 the group operated as an effective mechanism for policing and reinforcing the rules of the game. UNIFIL has also functioned throughout its existence (from 1978 to the present) as a useful backchannel conduit for indirect communications between the belligerents.

One measure of the importance of the accepted rules was that both Israel and Hezbollah apologized for actions that fell outside the rules, as in November 1998 when Hezbollah apologized for a katyusha firing it had not authorized and which it condemned. Israel has occasionally acted with marked restraint after suffering major casualties, on the argument that a given Hezbollah attack was permitted by the rules. It also bears emphasizing that Hezbollah resistance operations were mainly targeted against Israeli soldiers and the allied Lebanese militia, not against civilians. This is an important difference between Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Palestine. Whereas Hamas has intentionally targeted Israeli civilians, not least in suicide bombings, Hezbollah usually did not do so over the course of Israel's long occupation in Lebanon. Though shocking, perhaps, to many Western observers, the twelve suicide attacks launched by Hezbollah were all targeted against the occupation force and its allies, all legitimate resistance targets.

This is not to say that both sides always played by the rules. Both sides periodically disregarded time-honored principles of noncombatant immunity and proportionality. Resistance attacks on Israeli soldiers sometimes sparked indiscriminate Israeli reprisals that led to civilian deaths, especially after several Israeli soldiers had been killed. Hezbollah proved adept at moving within the rule box, which no doubt frustrated Israeli soldiers. The IDF, on a day-to-day basis, often adopted a policy of

shoot first and ask questions later, which made daily life more than a bit risky for those living in the shadow of the Security Zone. Thus civilians were regularly killed “by accident.” In all, more than five hundred Lebanese and Palestinian civilians were killed in southern Lebanon from the time of the 1982 invasion until Israel’s withdrawal in 2000, or more than thirty times the number of Israeli civilian fatalities during this time. Human Rights Watch has carefully analyzed the deadly civilian toll (see, for example, Hilberman 1996).

The logic of Israel’s “iron fist” was to punish Lebanese civilians disproportionately for the inability of the IDF to prevent attacks on its own soldiers and for retaliatory firing of katyusha rockets at Israel. Support for the resistance would wither, Israeli strategists thought, if they placed an awesome burden on the Lebanese, as, for example, when several hundred thousand people were roused from their homes and given a few hours to flee on threat of bombardment in April 1996. This proved to be a miscalculation, as many Lebanese believed that less resistance would induce Israel not to leave but to stay in the South.

Although Israel is anathema in the ideology of Hezbollah, there have been some mechanisms for negotiation, often through UNIFIL and sometimes through European states. The rules of the game allowed for both sides to conduct periodic, indirect negotiations for the return of prisoners and bodies.³ Typically, German negotiators have played an active role in the negotiations. Thus, in 1996, in return for the bodies of 2 IDF and 17 SLA soldiers, Israel released 45 detainees and the remains of 123 Lebanese. A similar exchange occurred in 1998, which was notable because one of the Lebanese bodies exchanged by Israel was that of Hadi Nasrallah, the son of Hezbollah Secretary-General Hasan Nasrallah. Hadi was killed in September 1997 during a raging battle with Israeli forces in southern Lebanon. (The elder Nasrallah’s stoic acceptance of his son’s death is often cited by party members as one of the reasons he is so highly esteemed.) The most sensational prisoner exchange was conducted as late as January 2004, when, in return for three bodies and one living retired lieutenant colonel who had been captured in Beirut, Israel released 23 Lebanese and 400 Palestinian prisoners. The Lebanese included Mustafa Dirani (captured in 1994) and Shaikh Abdul Karim ‘Ubayd (captured in 1989). These men had been held by Israel in Camp 1391, one of the places Israeli officials do not

talk about, as bargaining chips to gain information about Ron Arad, a long missing aviator who was captured alive in Lebanon in 1986 but whose fate is now unknown.

The 2000 Israeli Withdrawal

In 1999 the retired chief of staff General Ehud Barak was elected prime minister of Israel. One of his campaign promises was that he would withdraw from Lebanon within twelve months of assuming office, either in conjunction with bilateral negotiations with Syria or unilaterally, with the former the obvious preference. After several months of preparatory discussion between Israel and Syria in March 2000, President William Clinton flew to Geneva to meet with Syrian President Hafez al-Asad, and, to the utter surprise of al-Asad and multitudes of Lebanese and Syrians, the negotiations failed. Barak refused (to Clinton's apparent annoyance) to release a pocket of Syrian land abutting Lake Tiberias, and the Syrians found this unacceptable. Al-Asad told Clinton, "I used to swim in that lake as a boy," and he insisted that all occupied Syrian land be returned. Israel then began focusing on unilateral withdrawal.

After the abortive Geneva meeting, the run-up to Israel's unilateral withdrawal began. Confusion abounded in Beirut and Damascus, with dire warnings of widespread chaos in Lebanon, including bloody vendettas and the slaughter of collaborators. Hasan Nasrallah's statements stood out for their clear analysis and calm assurances of Hezbollah's careful preparations for the aftermath of withdrawal. He emphasized that there would be no retaliatory killings or revenge attacks. In contrast, many other officials seemed like actors confused about their lines and unsure of their parts, so disconcerting and unwelcome was a voluntary Israeli exit.

Hezbollah maintained a position of calculated and coy ambiguity concerning the Israeli withdrawal. Although it was widely believed in Lebanon that the violence against the Jewish state would stop after the Israeli withdrawal, Hezbollah avoided saying so directly. Muhammad Ra'd—the unflappable and very popular Hezbollah leader and schoolteacher from al-Nabatiya, who has been elected four times to the Lebanese parliament on the party's ticket—argued, in a 1996 interview with the author, that ambiguity increased Lebanese anxiety and the fear of Israel.

The withdrawal finally came on May 24, 2000. It was a time of extraordinary celebration in Lebanon, most especially in the South, and displaced residents immediately flooded into the South to repossess their liberated homes and villages. At the prison of al-Khiam, a horrendous detention center run by the SLA in close collaboration with Israel and the site of much mistreatment, even torture, people were literally tearing down prison doors with their bare hands to free the prisoners. In the rest of the countryside, apart from a few incidents that mainly involved beatings of collaborators—not even serious injuries, much less deaths—there was a remarkable degree of calm. Very little associated violence occurred, and certainly none of the revenge killings so widely anticipated. Many of the SLA people fled to Israel with their families. Those who remained were tried for collaboration and, typically, given sentences of four or five years, and in some cases advised not to return to their villages for a time. Overall, that juncture will be remembered as a remarkably orderly and humane period, especially when measured against the history of internecine violence that scarred Lebanon for much of the preceding few decades.

The summer following Israel's withdrawal, a serious debate arose within Hezbollah about whether to focus on Lebanese politics and themes, such as corruption, or to maintain the resistance posture both in Lebanon and the Middle East. After internal party discussions settled on the latter strategy, Nasrallah consulted with the Iranian *rahbar* (or leader) Ayatollah 'Ali Khamenei, who gave his blessing to continue the resistance, especially in the Israeli-Palestinian theater. Hezbollah found a clever pretext to continue paramilitary operations against Israel by attacking Israeli patrols on farmland adjoining the village of Shebaa, a disputed territory in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights (called "Har Dov," Mount David, by Israelis) that Lebanon claims as its own. Israeli military presence there allowed Hezbollah to maintain a military posture on the pretext that the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon had not been complete.

During the period between the Israeli withdrawal of May 2000 and the explosion of war in July 2006 (examined in [chapter 6](#)), one Israeli civilian was killed by Hezbollah weapons, and five more were killed in a Palestinian operation that may have had Hezbollah's help. Nine Israeli soldiers died in Hezbollah attacks in the contested farms area, and eight others were killed in six clashes along the "Blue Line" demarcated by the

UN after Israel's withdrawal. Some of the attacks were in retaliation for Israeli-caused deaths in Lebanon. At least twenty-one Israeli soldiers were also wounded. The total of seventeen Israeli soldiers killed during a six-year period contrasted to an average of twenty-five Israeli soldiers who died annually during Israel's occupation of southern Lebanon, according to Israeli Justice Minister Haim Ramon.

Harassing fire, aggressive patrolling, and heated rhetoric by both sides marked the entire period. On the Lebanese side of the border billboards facing Israel exhibited slogans in Hebrew, stating, for example, "If you come back, we'll come back." Hezbollah delighted in sponsoring cross-border taunting and stone throwing at Israeli military positions. In fact, piles of rocks were conveniently available adjacent to the Fatima gate, through which Israel had often entered Lebanon.

This six-year period was, however, a relatively quiet, peaceful time by historical standards, and this was frequently commented on by Israeli officials prior to the summer of 2006. The more serious clashes tended to occur in the Shebaa area of the occupied Golan Heights. This period is important to consider because it indicated that maintaining stability across this hostile border is neither impossible nor infeasible. Indeed, the rules of the game were well understood by both Israel and its Hezbollah foe.

In October 2000, Hezbollah launched an operation in the Shebaa Farms area that led to the ambush and capture of three Israeli soldiers. The captives all died, either on the spot or later from their wounds, their bodies only returned in the January 2004 exchange. After that operation Israel resumed the routine violations of Lebanese airspace and territorial waters that it had ceased in May or June 2000, when it was seeking UN certification of its withdrawal under the terms of Security Council Resolution 425. From October 2000 on, Israeli war planes regularly flew over Lebanese territory, with sonic booms over Beirut, intelligence collecting drones, and similar incursions. In time, Hezbollah began firing anti-aircraft weapons at Israeli planes violating Lebanese airspace, but as they were firing southward, in the direction the planes were coming from, the spent ammunition rounds would land in Israel. Hezbollah also began firing Katyusha rockets, mostly into the occupied Golan Heights, with a few episodes of Katyusha firings into Israel proper as well. Several dozen incidents involving attempted infiltrations or firing into Israel occurred

during 2000–2006. In almost every case, according to Israeli sources, the culprits in these incidents were Palestinian fedayeen, not Hezbollah.

Periodic episodes of violence during this period occurred in the Shebaa Farms area, Israeli-occupied territory. In a typical incident an Israeli patrol would come under fire from Hezbollah fighters, and the Israeli military would retaliate with artillery or limited air strikes. The rules were so well established, in fact, that officials on both sides were periodically quoted as saying that such and such a military action was within the “rules of the game.”

Israel’s withdrawal from southern Lebanon was followed closely by the eruption of the second Intifada, or Palestinian uprising, in September 2000. That Intifada movement clearly was partially inspired by Hezbollah’s stunning success. In 2000 and 2001 Hezbollah flags flew in many Palestinian camps in the West Bank and Gaza, and Hezbollah played a role in training anti-Israeli Palestinians and a minor role in supplying them. The major exception were the arms that Iran shipped on the *Karine-A*, which included a Hezbollah crewman and was intercepted by Israel in January 2002 (the incident apparently encouraged George W. Bush to pin the “axis-of-evil” label on Iran). Otherwise, Nasrallah carefully stressed that the job of liberating Palestine belonged to the Palestinians, just as the job of liberating the Golan Heights belonged to Syria. Even so, the level of incitement from Hezbollah was very high. The Hezbollah television station al-Manar (“the Lighthouse”) beamed terrestrial and satellite propaganda to many avid Palestinian viewers. The number of viewers had peaked in 2001, and dropped in 2003 to 8 percent, compared to an audience of more than 50 percent for the CNN-clone al-Jazeera. Al-Manar was the sixth most popular satellite station in the Arab world, trailing far behind al-Arabiya as well as al-Jazeera, according to a January 2006 poll by the U.S. firm Zogby International.

In Lebanon, meanwhile, the Hezbollah leadership was unanimously persuaded, as were most of the supporters, that its demonstrated military prowess and accumulating military arsenal provided by Iran and Syria was successfully deterring Israel from invading Lebanon again, or from bombarding Lebanon as it had done so often in the past. In July 2006, however, Hezbollah was to discover that its deterrent shield was not as intimidating as it imagined.

¹ For an official Israeli report of the incident, see <http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Foreign%20Relations/Israels%20Foreign%20Relations%20since%201947/1982-1984>.

² The UN report was prepared by Major General Franklin van Kappen, a Dutch officer serving on the staff of Secretary General Boutros Boutros Ghali. See Security Council document S/1996/337, May 7, 1996, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N96/117/52/IMG/N9611752.pdf?OpenElement>.

See also Amnesty International, “Unlawful Killings during Operation ‘Grapes of Wrath,’ “July 1996, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde15/042/1996/en/> (accessed October 21, 2006); and Human Rights Watch, “Israel/Lebanon: ‘Operation Grapes of Wrath’: The Civilian Victims” (September 1997).

³ A typical statement of Hezbollah’s position on Israel is provided by ‘Abdallah Qasir, a former member of parliament: “Direct negotiations are impossible because we do not recognize the existence of the State of Israel” (*Al-Zaman*, May 29, 2002).

Chapter 5

Playing Politics

Lebanon has a curious electoral system that is intended to accommodate its mélange of confessional spirits, diverse regional interests, and personal rivalries. Until the civil war years of 1975–1990, voters went to the polls every four years to vote for members of parliament. As a result of the Ta’if Accords of 1989, which marked the end of the civil war, seats are divided equally between Muslim and Christians, in contrast to the prior distribution that favored Christians by a 6 to 5 ratio. The 128 parliamentary seats are subdivided along confessional lines: 27 seats each for the three largest sects—Shi’a, Sunni, and Maronites—with most districts confessionally mixed. Voters cast ballots for each available seat in the district regardless of the seat’s confessional label. The system promotes local intersectarian alliances to persuade voters to cast votes for an entire alliance list rather than picking and choosing individual candidates. Voters are not without discretionary choices, such as the fairly common *al-tashtib*, or “crossing out”; the voter scratches out the undesired candidate and then votes for the remaining members of a list rather than for the whole list. On rare occasions voters even pick and choose among lists, writing in the names of their preferred candidates.



The Bahman hospital in the southern suburbs of Beirut, one of a multitude of social services connected with Shi'i foundations, religious figures or political groups such as Hezbollah. Copyright © A. R. Norton, 2006.

When the civil war in Lebanon finally ended, elections for parliament had not been held in eighteen years. Only about two-thirds of the parliamentarians from the 1975 Chamber of Deputies survived to see the chaos and bloodshed end. As an ostensible transitional step, parliamentary appointments in 1991 filled forty seats. This unpopular technique was, in

part, a device championed by Syria to seed the new parliament with pro-Damascus militia leaders who had gained power during the civil war. The appointments coincided with the consolidation of Syria's grip on Lebanon, which was formalized in May 1991 with a Treaty of Brotherhood, Cooperation, and Coordination. The treaty legitimated a heavy Syrian hand, particularly in defense and security realms.

The first post-civil war elections were finally held in 1992. Unsuccessful efforts to formally explore the monitoring of balloting were launched by the International Peace Academy, the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, and the Centre for Lebanese Studies, which included such highly respected figures as the late Katchiq Babikian, who had served with distinction as Lebanon's minister of justice. These efforts—which count this author as one of the initiators—proved fruitless when it became clear that neither Beirut nor Damascus had the slightest inclination to welcome foreign oversight. Syria's covert manipulation of these elections included interference in the composition of candidate lists and drawing up electoral districts with a view to isolating opposition voices and insuring the victory of Syria's allies.

Many Lebanese Christians, especially Maronites, were deeply resentful of Syria's overbearing role, and they moved to boycott the elections. As a result of the boycott, voter participation rates of less than 10 percent were not uncommon in predominantly Christian districts and, thanks to the absence of many Christian voters at the polls, pro-Syrian candidates were swept into office in many districts where they might otherwise have faced tougher competition.

Hezbollah's Decision to Participate

The 1992 elections posed a crucial question for Hezbollah: Should the party adhere to its previous denunciation of the confessional electoral system as corrupt, and reject participation, or seize the moment and compete in the election? The very idea that Hezbollah would participate in Lebanese elections had been rejected outright by its leaders in the 1980s. However, the most influential Shi'i cleric in Lebanon, Shaikh Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah, had been espousing a pro-election position for years. Fadlallah argued that, because revolutionary transition to Islamic rule and an Islamic

state was impossible in the diverse Lebanese society, gradual reformation was necessary. And that, insisted Fadlallah, required participating in the political system. As Jamal Sankari reveals in his intricately detailed biography of the pragmatic Fadlallah, the Shi'i cleric emphasized the need to come to a *modus vivendi* with the state rather than remain outside the political system and judge it as abhorrent in strictly Islamic terms. Other leading Lebanese clerics less closely associated with Hezbollah made similar points. The late Shaikh Muhammad Mahdi Shams al-Din, a cleric revered for his intellectual depth and leader and president of the Supreme Islamic Shi'i Council from 1978 to 2001, told me emphatically, in a 1997 interview, that it is necessary for Islamist parties to take into account the power of contending secular forces. Shams al-Din emphasized that political compromises are often necessary.

Hezbollah's Deputy Secretary-General Na'im Qassem, who began his involvement in Lebanese politics, like many party members, as a member of Amal in the 1970s, has offered an insider's account of the deep internal debate that preceded the 1992 elections. Twelve leading members were deputized to debate the issue, including Qassem; Nasrallah, who had replaced the assassinated 'Abbas al-Musawi just the year before; and Subhi al-Tufayli, the president of the ephemeral Islamic Republic of Baalbek (the major town in the northern Beqaa valley) in 1984, who rose to become Hezbollah's first secretary-general in 1989. The debate turned on three key questions. From the standpoint of Islamic law, was participation in a "non-Islamic" government legitimate? Should ideology bend to practical interests? And would Hezbollah, by its participation, be co-opted into a secular political system, thereby deserting its principles and Islamic vision? Al-Tufayli, known not for eloquence but for rash stridency, insisted (and continues to insist) that by running for office the party would be "selling out," and that Hezbollah would be transformed (*tahawwal*) from a revolutionary force to a tame political participant. Other members sought a compromise, suggesting that party members should run as individuals, not in the name of the party.

The legitimacy issue was referred to Iran's Ali Khamenei, who succeeded Ruhollah Khomeini as the supreme legal authority (*wali al-faqih*), in 1989, upon Khomeini's death. In Shi'ism individuals choose a respected and learned scholar as their *marji'al-taqlid*, or "source of

emulation,” their ultimate authority on Islamic law. In Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini had taken this principle a major step beyond accepted practice by arguing for the necessity of a supreme jurisconsult, a distinguished Shi‘i scholar who would not just resolve religious and legal matters but also would be the nation’s ultimate political authority. Thus Iran’s ‘Ali Khamenei, considered by Hezbollah to be its “official” marji‘, gave his blessing to the possibility of Hezbollah’s participation in Lebanese elections, thereby strongly supporting the pro-election wing and also providing grist for Hezbollah’s critics in Lebanon who question its national identity. Incidentally, at that time most rank-and-file Hezbollah members and supporters emulated Iraq’s Ayatollah ‘Ali al-Sistani or Lebanon’s Ayatollah Fadlallah, who are both important thinkers in the Shi‘i world. The Iranian leader was simply not taken very seriously as a religious scholar in the early 1990s, although he enjoyed obvious and important political authority.

In the end, ten men embraced running for office, whereas two, including al-Tufayli, rejected the idea and left in a fury over the decision, which, at the delegation’s conclusion, was again submitted to Khamenei for approval.

The determination to enter Lebanese politics for the first time was widely popular in the Shi‘i community. Adherents of both Amal and Hezbollah had always suffered a deep-seated sense of political disenfranchisement, so the prospect of gaining representation offered hope of growing political empowerment. Of course, some viewed the elections merely as means for greater access to political benefits, literally allocations (*muhasasat*), which refers to access to government jobs, contracts, licenses, or permits, among other goods that are typically allocated along confessional lines in Lebanon. But officials debating the question also saw strategic benefits to winning elected office. Hezbollah would gain both official recognition as a political institution in Lebanon as well as a public podium, and would also be able to influence the budget to its constituents’ advantage. By being inside the political system, Hezbollah might also be able to shape political dialogue to its benefit, as well as head off problematic initiatives. In the end, therefore, ideology bent to pragmatism, and Nasrallah announced, on July 3, 1992, that the party would compete in that summer’s elections.

In the 1992 elections Hezbollah and its non-Shi‘i electoral allies (often from Baalbek, where Shi‘a comprise only about half the population) captured twelve seats in the Lebanese parliament, including eight Shi‘i seats. With only small variations from one election to the next, Hezbollah has maintained its electoral standing, routinely winning around 10 percent of all parliamentary seats. And although the Hezbollah leadership sometimes made questionable use of Islamic doctrine in each election—for example, the leadership’s repeated declaration that Hezbollah members were legally required, as though commanded by Allah (*taklif alshar‘i*), to support the party—most striking about Hezbollah’s political campaigns is the extent to which non-religious themes are habitually emphasized. The party electoral platform emphasizes battling economic exploitation and underdevelopment, inequities in the political system, personal freedom and opportunity, and, of course, security. Hezbollah’s electoral strategy does not dwell explicitly on religious themes at all, in stark contrast to, for example, Christian fundamentalist groups in the United States.

For many years the central preoccupation of the Shi‘i community has been the Israeli military occupation of southern Lebanon. Hezbollah has regularly capitalized on its role in the resistance in its campaign slogans, as in 1996 when some of its posters read: “They resist with their blood, resist with your vote.” Particularly in 2000, the year of Israel’s unilateral withdrawal, Hezbollah might have won four or five more seats at the expense of Amal but the *saqf al-suri*, or the “Syrian ceiling,” was widely understood to set an upper limit on the number of Hezbollahi candidates permitted to compete. The ceiling reflected Syria’s usual balancing act in Lebanese politics, with the result that, in 2000, an Amal-Hezbollah alliance—the Resistance and Development Bloc—won all twenty-three available seats in southern Lebanon and more than a quarter of all seats in parliament (table 5.1).

TABLE 5.1
Parliamentary Election Results for 27 Shi‘i Seats

<i>Non-Shi'i Hezbollah allies</i>						
	<i>Hezbollah</i>	<i>Amal</i>	<i>Other Shi'is*</i>	<i>Sunni</i>	<i>Greek Catholic</i>	<i>Maronite</i>
1992	8	9	10	2	1	1
1996	7	8	12	1		1
2000	9	6	12	2		1
2005	11	11	5	2		1

*Secular parties and traditional elites.

Municipal Elections

Unlike the parliamentary elections, in which Syria meddled incessantly during its years of hegemony in Lebanon, municipal elections have largely been left alone. Most election observers have noted the relative fairness of Lebanon's municipal elections, especially compared to its recent parliamentary elections, which have been transparently manipulated by the government and by Syria. The stakes are lower, the contests are harder to stage-manage, and it is not as easy to fool local voters if their choices are thwarted. Thus recent elections in municipalities provide a useful gauge of the popularity of Hezbollah and its rivals. These elections also illustrate the pragmatic political bargains that Hezbollah has often made with ideological opposites, such as the avowedly secular Syrian Social Nationalist Party and even the Communist Party. This is a striking contrast to the 1980s when Hezbollah fought pitched battles with the Syrian Social Nationalist Party and reputedly killed dozens of members of the Communist Party.

The municipal elections in the summer of 1998 were the first local elections in more than three decades. Hezbollah demonstrated its strong base in Beirut, especially in al-dahiya (the suburbs), where it soundly thrashed the candidates of Nabih Berri's Amal Party. In the massive Beirut suburbs of Burj al-Barajnah and al-Ghubayri, Hezbollah slates carried the day. Ghubayri has become an interesting example of Hezbollah's capacity to govern at the local level. It is the largest town in the suburbs and it has been singled out by the United Nations for its exemplary efforts at providing low-income housing.¹

In Ghubayri the 1998 Hezbollah municipal election slate was led by Muhammad Sa‘id al-Khansa, a scion of a large and much respected clan that dominates the busy trade in automobile parts. The Khansas are represented across a rich variety of businesses far removed from tires and transmissions, including the haute couture studio of Jamil al-Khansa, which is well known in Paris and the Gulf. Like many other extended Lebanese families, the Khansas boast a government-chartered family association that gives needy members of the large extended family subsidies and loans for foreign education, sophisticated medical attention, or disaster relief. With hundreds of clan members, the al-Khansa family enjoys considerable electoral clout at the municipal level. Their Husseiniya—which, as discussed in [chapter 3](#), is the building used annually during Muharram for the commemoration of Imam Hussein’s martyrdom at Karbala—is one of the largest in al-dahiya, which makes it an important political and social site as well as an important gathering place for community events and rites of passage, such as funerals.

Although parliamentary speaker and Amal leader Nabih Berri’s slate performed poorly in al-dahiya, Amal performed credibly in the South and in the Beqaa valley, winning control of Tyre, a movement stronghold. Hezbollah held its own by capturing the southern municipality of al-Nabatiya. In the southern town of Sarafand, Hezbollah aligned with the secular Syrian Social Nationalist Party to win shared control of the municipal council. In the underdeveloped northern Beqaa valley, Amal captured Baalbek through a deal with secular parties and farmers, and Hezbollah captured Hirmil to the north. Although Baalbek is often thought of as the bedrock of Hezbollah, the city’s population is only half Shi‘i Muslim, with Sunnis and Christians accounting for the rest. The Beqaa valley also features one of Hezbollah’s most formidable regional political rivals, former Hezbollah secretary-general Subhi al-Tufayli, who has accused his former party of dotting on the South to the neglect of the suffering Beqaa. Al-Tufayli has built a large constituency in the Beqaa valley, where the economy remains heavily dependent upon agriculture, including illicit drug cultivation.

The Revolt of the Hungry

By the mid-1990s Lebanon's agricultural sector was suffering from the flood of cheap produce from Syria. (Syria's exploitation of its free access to the Lebanese economy ended only in 2005.) The hardship this caused to the valley's farmers spawned a mood of angry discontent that al-Tufayli helped to inflame. Al-Tufayli famously opposed Hezbollah's decision to run in Lebanese elections, but by 1997 he announced that he would be running for election in the 1998 municipal races. Then, on July 4, 1997, he organized rallies that, while banned by the government, were still attended by several thousand followers. Al-Tufayli's populist platform—the *thawrat al-jiyaa'*, or "revolution of the hungry"—included demands for job creation; crop subsidies; free education, electricity, and water; and state benefits and pensions for service with the resistance in lieu of army service. The platform implicitly criticized Hezbollah for failing its needy constituents and prompted well-founded concern on the part of the Hezbollah leadership, which understood the potential attraction of a "revolution of the hungry" in the dense Shi'i suburbs of Beirut.

Al-Tufayli's seeds of revolution bore electoral fruit. In the 1998 municipal elections al-Tufayli captured his hometown as well as neighboring Tarayya but split a large adjoining village with Hezbollah.

In January 1998, al-Tufayli and his followers seized a nearby Hezbollah school. In an ensuing clash eight people were killed, including an army lieutenant. Al-Tufayli was later indicted for causing the officer's death, but he was never brought to trial. He is still on the scene, accusing Hezbollah of being a tool of Syrian foreign policy and a servant of Israel, and charging that Hasan Nasrallah is an intelligence agent for Iran. He explains, not unjustifiably, that his freedom of action is the result of his huge following, which acts as a check on Hezbollah's influence. As the al-Tufayli episode illustrated, Hezbollah could not afford to take its electoral success in Lebanon for granted.

In the next set of municipal elections, in 2004, Hezbollah offered a more palatable political program in the Beqaa and Hirmil regions than it had in 1998. Building on a proven track record of efficient governance, and profiting from its leading role in the liberation of the South, the party was a steamroller in both the Beqaa and in the Beirut suburbs, as well as in the South. The voters' enthusiasm for Hezbollah also had been bolstered by the German-mediated release, in January 2004, of four hundred Palestinian and

twenty-three Lebanese prisoners from Israeli jails in return for a captured retired lieutenant colonel and the bodies of three Israeli soldiers. Not only did Hezbollah capture the municipality of Baalbek, but it gained control of twenty-six other local governments in the Beqaa, where it lost only three contests. Throughout Lebanon it topped its main rival, Amal, by 2 to 1 in local government seats won.

The Rich Texture of Shi‘i Institutions

The Lebanese government offers paltry social welfare services for its citizens, and the few that are available are heavily concentrated within Beirut. A broad range of services are sorely needed in al-dahiya, where per capita income is one-fifth to one-sixth of the national average (\$6,000 prior to the 2006 war). With no safety net of state-provided social services, life has traditionally been very hard indeed for those without prosperous extended families. But the glaring lack of nonfamily-based support services began to ease in recent decades, at least in the Shi‘i community, owing in part to the vision of the Shi‘i cleric Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah. During the civil war Fadlallah spoke about the necessity of creating a *dawlat al-insan*, or “a government for mankind,” that would provide the resources for people to help themselves and one another. Fadlallah’s concept has inspired the emergence of many private social service associations mostly serving the Shi‘i community. Some are linked directly to Fadlallah or to other leading sayyids, institutions, and parties, notably including the Musa al-Sadr Foundation, the Supreme Islamic Shi‘i Council, the Amal movement, and Hezbollah. Husseiniyas, some built by families, others funded by municipalities or benevolent trusts (*awqaf*; sing., *waqf*) are often important centers for associational life, and in smaller villages they are often the only site for social assistance. Anthropologist Lara Deeb (2006, 170) recently quoted a Shi‘i woman in the Beirut suburbs who observed, “Before, there was nothing here, not a single *jam‘iya* (charitable organization), nothing.” Although not literally true, the statement does underline the paucity of *jam‘iyat*, or associations, only a few decades ago.

The present abundance of associations in the Shi‘i community is an essential part of the construction of a modern, confident notion of identity,

and a spirit of activism and volunteerism (discussed in [chapter 3](#)) stands in contrast to earlier, rampant acceptance of deprivation among the Shi'a.

Fadlallah was particularly effective as an institution builder. In 1976 he was named *wakil*, or deputy, by the Najaf-based Ayatollah al-'Uzma Sayyid Abu al-Qasim al-Khu'i, who until his death in 1992 was one of the most revered of the *marja'i*. ("sources" of law). As al-Khu'i's *wakil*, Fadlallah was entrusted to collect donations on his behalf and use those donations for good purpose in Lebanon. Thus Fadlallah oversaw cooperatively with Musa al-Sadr and Muhammad Mahdi Shams al-Din the Imam Khu'i Orphanage (begun ca. 1963 in Beirut), as well as the Bahman Hospital in al-dahiya. With the death of his colleagues, these important institutions were absorbed by Fadlallah's massive Benevolent Charity Society (Jam'iyyat al-Mabarrat al-Khayriyya, created in 1978). Fadlallah's Social Services Office (Maktab al-Khadamat al-Ijtima'iyya) is also highly respected. These institutions employ several thousand people and include many volunteers.

Although wealthy Shi'a, including émigrés and rich Shi'a in the Gulf, are often important donors, most of the *jam'iyyaat* depend heavily on local fund-raising and donations or generate income themselves. As Lara Deeb (2006, 89) notes, Fadlallah's rich complex of institutions includes businesses such as gas stations, a publishing house, a photocopy store, a factory for religiously permissible or *halal* foods (such as meat that has been slaughtered according to Islamic rules—similar to kosher standards), and a computer store. Individual donations include alms (*zakat*) that may be paid in kind, such as gifts of food for the poor; Ramadan gifts; *khums* (a fifth of one yearly income after meeting living expenses), half of which is paid to one's *marji'* or *wakil* and the other half to a descendant of the prophet or *sayyid*; and ad hoc donations by the faithful (*sadaqat*). Respected *jam'iyyat* are often authorized by several *maraji's* to collect donations on their behalf. It is not unusual for as much as two million dollars to be collected on a single night during Ramadan.

Also noteworthy is the Imam Sadr Foundation based in the southernmost city of Tyre and run by Rabab al-Sadr, the sister of Imam Musa. In addition to the Burj al-Barajnah vocational school for boys, Sitt Rabab heads an extremely impressive vocational institute for women, which is often much admired by visitors.

Hezbollah offers an array of social services to its constituents that include construction companies, schools, hospitals, dispensaries, and micro-finance initiatives (notably al-Qard al-Hasan, literally the “good loan,” which began making loans in 1984 and now offers about 750 small loans a month). These tend to be located in predominantly Shi‘i areas, but some serve anyone requesting help. Hezbollah hospital and clinic staff also treat all walk-in patients, regardless of political views or their sect, for only a small fee.

Much of the funding for the social and medical infrastructure is raised domestically, but Hezbollah also receives significant subsidies from Iran. The amounts are often estimated at \$100 million a year, but, in fact, they vary widely, depending on the political climate in Iran. A significant portion of Iranian support is for Hezbollah’s militia wing. Several of the Hezbollah-sponsored societies are actually branches of Iranian organizations or were initially created by Iran. Hence the large Islamic Charity Emdad Committee was created in 1987 with Iranian financial support but today depends heavily on volunteer labor. Deeb (2006, 90) notes that of 440 Emdad employees only about 90 were paid, and many paid employees donate a significant amount of unpaid labor. The Martyrs Foundation was created in 1982 by Khomeini and operates as a sister organization to an Iranian organization of the same name, as does the Association for the Wounded. Other organizations were created by Hezbollah, more notably the Jihad al-Bina’ Development Organization, which has literally reconstructed and repaired much of the damage wrought by war. The Hezbollah Women’s Committee and the Islamic Health Committee are important groups as well.

The Amal movement also provides various services to its supporters, including schools, clinics, and hospitals, some of which rival individual Hezbollah facilities. Amal is able to draw on the donations of its membership and some well-to-do benefactors, but it lacks a generous benefactor such as the role Iran plays for Hezbollah. The Amal movement’s institutions generally have had much less impact on Lebanese society than either Hezbollah’s institutions or those connected with leaders such as Ayatollah Fadlallah. Of course, as speaker of the parliament, Amal’s leader, Nabih Berri, is an important source of government patronage, which is often harnessed to Amal’s purposes.

A Shi'i friend told me in 2004 that "there are no needy people in al-dahiya," implying that the rich fabric of social and charitable organizations meets the needs of people who would otherwise be impoverished. A safety net exists today that simply was not there before, and many Shi'a take pride in knowing that they have helped to build it. Nonetheless, segments of the community remain in distress, as the example of Subhi al-Tufayli's Beqaa-based "Revolt of the Hungry" demonstrated.

The social services institutions that do exist in the Shi'i community were put to an extraordinary test in 2006 by the Israeli attacks that targeted broad swaths of the Shi'i community and left as many as fifteen thousand homes destroyed or badly damaged. The severe, extensive damage obviously has overwhelmed even Hezbollah's services framework, but the party's prompt action to meet its constituents' needs in August 2006 (discussed in [chapter 6](#)) is a vivid example of the competence and professionalism that has won Hezbollah extensive support among many Lebanese Shi'a.

More important than the specifics of any one association is the evidence that a palpable sense of community and religious commitment (*iltizam*) now exists and emphasizes that a mark of faith is to offer a helping hand to others and participate in the community. Ayatollah Fadlallah was known for capturing this ethos in his comment that he does not want followers but rather partners. It is impossible to appreciate the striking durability and loyalty that modern Shi'i groups, such as Hezbollah or comparable groups in Iraq, for instance, generate unless one understands that their strength derives from the sturdy social fabric they have woven over the years.

¹ The suburb is also notable for another reason, well known to Lebanese; namely, it is the site of Monoprix, which not only offers a nice selection of foods and clothing but is arguably the best liquor store in the country. The store is an important source of tax income for Ghubayri, because the municipality maneuvered deftly to prevent the national government from having all the tax revenues flow directly to the state. In 2000, when this writer asked the head of the municipality, a widely admired member of Hezbollah, about the sale of alcohol, normally prohibited in Islam, his response implied pragmatic tolerance. At first he noted that many Lebanese Christians shop in Monoprix, and Christians face no prohibition on alcohol. Then, when pushed a bit, he chuckled and said that many of the Shi'a who had worked in West Africa "drank like fish." With a laugh he said, "That's their choice."

Chapter 6

From Celebration to War

The exuberant nationwide Lebanese celebration of Israel's 2000 withdrawal began to run out of steam within a couple of years, particularly outside the formerly occupied region. People still made the trek to the large village of al-Khiam, a couple of miles north of the Israeli town of Metulla, where they visited the infamous Israeli prison from the period of the occupation. The prison, formerly a French military barracks built during the League of Nations mandate in pre-independence Syria and Lebanon (1920–43), had been a thoroughly miserable place to be jailed. Until Israel bombed it during the summer of 2006, it was preserved more or less as it was on May 24, 2000, the day of the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon, when the guards—members of the Israeli-funded proxy militia—fled and neighboring villagers forced the cells open. Visitors would come to gawk at the poorly lit, cramped cells, the frayed toothbrushes, improvised eating utensils, a “dispensary” that seemed more a janitor’s closet than a medical facility, and a metal utility pole to which inmates were occasionally tied and beaten with electric cables (on two occasions to death). After leaving al-Khiam, visitors might make their way to the much-bombed, ruined, but still awesome crusader fortress, Chateau de Beaufort, with its sweeping vistas of the Galilee, or to a memorial cemetery for the victims of the shelling of Qana in 1996. En route, Hezbollah flags were common, interspersed with billboards honoring martyrs and schematics recounting resistance operations. Voyeuristic sightseeing aside, many Lebanese wanted to “live and let live,” as one founding member of Hezbollah said to this author in May 2000. Israel was gone, and most Lebanese had no desire to fight other people’s battles. For five consecutive years, on May 25, the government sponsored an annual commemoration of the liberation of the South, but that stopped in 2006, as if Lebanon’s political elites had decided it was time to move on.



The Beirut suburbs of Haret Hreik on the morning of August 14, 2006, a few hours after a ceasefire in the 2006 war. Copyright © Ali Safa, 2006.

In the summer of 2000, before the second Palestinian *in-tifadah* erupted in September, and before Hezbollah began its campaign against the few remaining Israeli forces in the Shebaa Farms area of the occupied Golan Heights, Hasan Nasrallah was a regional, even international celebrity. He was rewarded by a visit from UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan. His ordering of the operation that led to the capture, in October, of three Israeli soldiers in the Shebaa area possessed a clear logic; like Israel, which had earlier captured Shi'i fighters in the South as bargaining chips, Hezbollah now had bargaining chips of its own. The chips were exploited to full effect when, with German help, a deal was reached in January 2004 to give up the bodies of the three captured soldiers (who were either dead when captured or succumbed to their wounds) and to return an Israeli reserve lieutenant colonel reputedly lured to Beirut under murky, apparently illicit circumstances. In an Israeli procedure clothed in secrecy, the officer was charged with unspecified crimes and agreed to a plea bargain by which he

was sentenced to the time that he was held in captivity by Hezbollah.¹ In exchange for the Israeli captives who were released, Israel freed 423 prisoners, of whom 23 were Lebanese and the remainder Palestinians. The prisoner exchange was a moment of triumph, which, as we saw in the previous chapter, paid off a few months later in sweeping victories for Hezbollah in the 2004 municipal elections.

The occasional skirmish in Shebaa often obscured the fact that, as noted in [chapter 4](#), for the six years following Israel's exit from Lebanon in the spring of 2000, the border was more or less quiet. This confounded many experts who had predicted that the Israeli exit would leave a vacuum that would likely be filled by mayhem. During these six years of relative stability, nine Israeli soldiers were killed in the Shebaa Farms area. Another eight Israeli soldiers were killed along the "Blue Line" demarcated by the UN after Israel's withdrawal (some on Lebanese soil and others on Israeli soil). A total of seventeen Israeli soldiers were lost during the six-year period compared to about twenty-five per year during the occupation. As far as Israeli civilian casualties were concerned, during this entire six-year period, there was only one Israeli civilian fatality, a teenaged boy who was killed by an anti-aircraft round fired by Hezbollah. (There was also an operation in 2002 involving two Palestinian fighters who managed to cross the border and ambush and kill six Israelis—five civilians and a soldier. Even though Hezbollah was not directly involved, it is difficult to imagine anyone crossing the border without some level of Hezbollah cooperation. If these are counted, the total Israeli civilian deaths were six, or one per year.) Lebanese and Palestinian civilian deaths during this same period included a shepherd killed by Israeli gunfire, and a preponderance of deaths caused by landmines and cluster bombs left as a legacy of Israel's operations and attacks.

As the euphoria of the Israeli withdrawal began to fade, so did the adulation for Hezbollah. Critics arose who argued that the organization's periodic attacks on Israel, even if confined to the Shebaa Farms area, were reckless and unjustified. In one of his many outspoken newspaper articles, Gibran Tueni, the publisher of Lebanon's leading newspaper and a widely read critic of both Syria and Hezbollah, asked: "Who authorized Nasrallah to represent all the Lebanese, to make decisions for them and to embroil them in something they don't want to be embroiled in? Did Nasrallah

appoint himself secretary general of all the Lebanese and the whole Arab world?” (*an-Nahar*, May 5, 2003). Tueni was only one of many who accused Nasrallah of being intoxicated with his own fame.

Another sign of discord involving Hezbollah at this time (2003) occurred when Nayif Krayem, the well-known director of the party’s television station al-Manar, was dismissed from his post because he seemed to be loyal to Ayatollah Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah, whose moral influence Hezbollah had come to distrust. All this arose indirectly from Hezbollah’s criticism of flagellation and similar religious practices in the ‘Ashura commemorations, as discussed in [chapter 4](#). Indeed, Hezbollah’s position is complementary to that of many senior *mujtahids* who argue that these rituals detract from Islam and divert people from appropriately contemplating the Muharram tragedy. Before his dismissal, Krayem wrote an article making the same points, using quotations from the revered Iranian Ayatollah Mortaza Mutaharri as support. The reason for his dismissal was not his citation of Mutaharri but the suspicion that he was using the citations as a smoke screen to obscure his debt to the ideas of Fadlallah, who, as previously seen in [chapter 5](#), was the most influential Shi‘i thinker and cleric in Lebanon. Krayem categorically denied the charges in an extraordinary series of newspaper articles in the Arabic press. Although frequently and incorrectly described in the West as Hezbollah’s “spiritual guide,” Fadlallah’s relationship with Hezbollah, although civil, was often strained and tense. Krayem’s 2003 firing should be understood to reflect not only the party leadership’s distrust of Fadlallah’s moral influence but their overall siege mentality following a couple of years of basking in adulation after the Israeli withdrawal.

As the U.S.-British invasion of Iraq loomed in early 2003, Hezbollah wanted to step out of the crosshairs. The party cooled its rhetoric, its episodic taunts along the border with Israel, and its strikes at Israeli army positions in the Shebaa region. Although many Lebanese Shi‘a adored him, Nasrallah won few plaudits from Iraqi co-religionists when he argued against toppling Saddam Hussein and his regime, and instead urged the Iraqis to convene a national reconciliation conference, with elections and the formation of a new government. There was no rush among Iraqi Shi‘a and Kurds to embrace Nasrallah’s unsolicited proposal; the plan only evoked their criticism, as they viewed the suggestion as laughable that the

Iraqi Baathist regime would conciliate itself out of existence. In the United States, meanwhile, the spring of its Iraq invasion in 2003 was a period of unfettered optimism not yet undermined by the Bush administration's miscalculations or the nightmare of violence that haunts Iraq still. Nasrallah's trenchant assessment proved prescient: "We tell the United States, don't expect that the people of this region will welcome you with roses and jasmine. The people of this region will welcome you with rifles, blood, and martyrdom operations. We are not afraid of the American invaders, and we will keep saying 'death to America'" (*al-Intiqad*, March 14, 2003). Such prophetic statements did nothing to diminish U.S. hostility toward Hezbollah.

Nasrallah had his own, self-serving, reasons to oppose the Americans. This became clear during the first weeks after the Iraq invasion, when the euphoria of a quick succession of victories led to speculation in and around the Bush administration about further, imminent military action to snatch the "low-hanging fruit" elsewhere in the region to exploit America's apparent strategic momentum. The threatening chatter, which received lively play in the Beirut media, referred most commonly to toppling the government in Syria, attacking Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the rather fanciful notion that the U.S. might sponsor an opposition uprising in Iran to topple the Islamic regime.

The Changing Social Tapestry in Post-Civil War Lebanon

Over the past few decades the social tapestry in Lebanon has changed in ways that help explain why sectarianism has kept a stubborn grip on the country, why Hezbollah has succeeded so well in mobilizing support, and why inter-confessional cooperation is more elusive today than it was a few decades ago. The key changes were a result of Lebanon's terrible civil war, which claimed nearly 150,000 lives, or nearly 5 percent of the country's population.

It is commonly assumed that the fifteen-year civil war in Lebanon, ending in 1990, was a conflict only between Christians and Muslims. There is some truth to this, for the main line of battle, especially in the first years of the conflict, divided the politically dominant Christian Maronite community and the mainly Muslim Palestinian resistance movement, which

saw Lebanon as a battleground in their war to wrest a homeland from Israel. However, this notion obscures much more complex patterns of belligerence involving many different sectarian groups at odds over the Palestinian cause. Many Lebanese Christians, especially the Greek Orthodox, who accounted for about 10 percent of the population during the civil war, tended to be much more sympathetic than the Maronites to the Palestinians. The non-Arab Armenian community, which is wholly Christian, mostly stayed out of the civil war, with notable exceptions of Armenian groups fighting on both sides. The main pro-Palestinian grouping of Lebanese during the civil war was the Lebanese National Movement, an admixture of Arab nationalists, communists in several flavors, and various sectarian militias, notably from the Druze community, which accounted for about 7 percent of the total population. Most of the Shi'a backed the Palestinian militias, but smaller yet not insignificant numbers joined the Maronite militias. Later in the war, especially in the 1980s, groups with a distinctly Shi'i sectarian orientation—particularly Amal and Hezbollah—emerged as significant players. As already noted, Amal opposed the Palestinian guerrillas and Hezbollah supported them.

Most Lebanese and others who witnessed the civil war agree that *ta'ifiyya* (sectarianism, or “confessionalism”) became more pronounced after the civil war than during the war. At least four factors may explain this heightened sectarianism, and these factors have been analyzed incisively by the Lebanese sociologist Salim Nasr (S. Nasr 2003).

For one, the outbreak of intercommunal violence at the start of the civil war forced a significant displacement of people that transformed the previously socially heterogeneous communities into more segmented patterns of living. An unfortunate example is the well-known shopping district in West Beirut, al-Hamra, where Christians and Muslims had lived closely together in adjacent apartments before the civil war, but today the Christian population has shrunk and Hamra is now predominantly Sunni Muslim. Some observers claim that the ambience of the once cosmopolitan Hamra has suffered as a result of this change. A short visit to Hamra will confirm this impression: If you stand, at ten or eleven in the evening, outside a movie theater that was once packed with patrons, today you will see only a handful of movie-goers trickle into the street when the movie ends.

Second, sectarianism has been abetted by growing economic difficulties, income inequality, and immense corruption, estimated by a UN-commissioned study, in the 1990s, to exceed \$1.5 billion a year (*Daily Star*, January 20, 2001). Even before the Israeli-Hezbollah war of 2006, the country's national debt stood at \$40 billion—the highest per capita national debt in the world—which had been created by massive public spending on infrastructure damaged during the civil conflicts and the Israeli invasion. (Much of the rebuilt infrastructure was destroyed by Israeli bombs in the summer of 2006, which would only add to the national debt problem.) The huge debt constrains the ability of the state to intervene in the economy and inhibits private sector investment, severely limiting economic opportunities. This has resulted in a shrinking middle class, increased flight of Lebanese with the financial means to emigrate (largely Christians, who have comparatively easier access to visas to the West), and growing dependence of the remaining population on the patronage dispensed by the new sectarian political bosses (*zu'ama*) such as Amal leader Nabih Berri, who gained immense power and personal wealth by dispensing largesse, jobs, and political favors.

A third cause of rising sectarianism concerns the revival of religious institutions and leaders, as illustrated by the strong influence during the early 2000s of the Maronite Patriarch Mar Nasrallah Sfeir, the Sunni Grand Mufti Muhammad Rashid Qabbani, and the head of the Supreme Islamic Shi'i Council Shaikh 'Abd al-Amr Qabalan. Within sectarian organizations, clerics have come to predominate. In Hezbollah, for example, Muhammad Ra'd and Muhammad Fneish, the only two non-clerical members of the seven-member al-Shura ("consultation" body), the highest decision-making body in the party, were replaced by clerics in 2001. Ra'd and Fneish, perhaps not coincidentally, were known to be pragmatists who were skeptical of the organization's belligerent risk-taking. (The only non-clerical member of al-Shura is now al-Hajj Hussein al-Khalil, a close political adviser to Nasrallah.) Although this religious revival cannot be traced to any single factor, Syria's domination of Lebanon's political space cannot be underestimated as a key element. Syrian hegemony stunted the growth of independent political personalities and, conversely, fostered the promotion of pro-Syrian sycophants. A political environment with little opportunity for men and women of real stature to develop as political

leaders attracts religious figures prepared to criticize widespread corruption and a generally compromised political system and advance a convincing normative model for a religiously rooted society.

A final reason concerns regional developments that have affected Sunni-Shi'i relations throughout the Middle East and beyond. The political ascendancy of the majority Shi'i community in Iraq in the wake of the American occupation has heightened the shared identity of Lebanese Shi'a to their religious brethren in Iraq. The rise of violent Sunni movements, such as al-Qaeda's branch in Iraq, which are virulently anti-Shi'i and frequently deny that the Shi'a qualify as Muslims, has encouraged Shi'i Muslims across the Middle East and even in Pakistan to identify themselves more in sectarian than secular terms. Younger Shi'a in the region are much less likely than their fathers and grandfathers were a generation or more ago to join secular parties of the ideological left or right.

Lebanon's Love-Hate Relationship with Rafiq al-Hariri, and His Assassination

When Rafiq al-Hariri was maneuvered out of office in 1998 after six years as Lebanon's prime minister, many Lebanese were happy to see him go. They were equally happy to see him return as prime minister in 2000, however, when the Lebanese surprised even themselves by upsetting Syria's plans for fraudulent elections that would install pro-Syrian officials. Disappointment with the government of Salim al-Huss, the Sunni politician who was prime minister from 1998 to 2000, was rampant, largely because it could not cope with the economic mess that al-Hariri had bequeathed. The transparent subservience of the al-Huss government toward Syria did not help either.

In the run-up to the 2000 national elections, al-Hariri's shadow loomed very large. The publicity-shy general Ghazi Kanaan, then the Syrian proconsul in Lebanon, dictated the redrawing of electoral districts in Beirut to facilitate simultaneous victories for Tamam Salaam, son of a former prime minister; Prime Minister al-Huss; and for Rafiq al-Hariri. According to Syria's master plan, the nineteen seats in Beirut would be divided between three pliant Sunni politicians in the capital. The smart money was betting that Najib Mikati from Tripoli, known for his close ties to Syria,

would head the new government. The election confounded the game plan. Al-Hariri proved to be a steamroller. He captured eighteen seats in Beirut and vanquished his two major Sunni opponents. The nineteenth seat was left open for a Shi'i Muslim from Hezbollah. Al-Hariri himself won his Beirut constituency with more votes than any of the other Sunni candidates in Beirut.

Al-Hariri had been careful to cultivate good ties in Syria, including Vice President 'Abdul Halim Khaddam, who long handled the Lebanon portfolio until Syrian leader Hafiz al-Asad passed it on to his son, Bashar. Press reports indicated a momentary warming with Bashar, to whom al-Hariri promised \$400 million in foreign investment for Syria, but the rapprochement was not destined to last.

The ensuing four years, until al-Hariri's resignation in October 2004, were marked by deadlock, political frustration, and mutual animosity between al-Hariri and Emile Lahoud, Lebanon's president since 1998. Lahoud, who was widely understood to be Bashar al-Asad's *wakil* (or "deputy") and who did not hesitate to wield the considerable power of his Syrian patron, succeeded in usurping the prerogatives of his adversary. For instance, although the prime minister chairs cabinet meetings under the terms of the 1989 Ta'if accord, President Lahoud assumed the prerogative to do so. Lahoud often summarily dismissed al-Hariri's agenda for cabinet meetings.

According to the Lebanese constitution, presidents may not succeed themselves. Al-Hariri made no secret of his unhappiness with Syria's plans to extend President Lahoud's six-year term in 2004 for a further three years. Syrian president al-Asad reacted sharply, informing al-Hariri in a curt ten-minute meeting in Damascus, in August 2004, that opposing Lahoud's extension would be considered tantamount to opposing the Syrian president. Accounts of this terse encounter began ricocheting around Beirut that same evening, when the former prime minister, Salim al-Huss, stated the bottom line succinctly when he met this author: "It is done."

Syria's engineering of Lahoud's three-year extension as president was received with approval, resignation, or resentment depending on where one sat on the political spectrum. For Hezbollah, Lahoud is an ally and a guarantor that the "resistance" will not be forced to disarm. In many quarters, including among veteran politicians such as al-Huss, the extension

was merely another example of Syria's controlling hand in Lebanese politics. In contrast, for many Christians and Druze, and certainly for al-Hariri and his allies, Syria's diktat provoked resentment and a mood of opposition. By deploying its power so brazenly, Damascus overreached and provoked an international response. The U.S. and France acted in concert with UN Security Council Resolution 1559, passed with their joint sponsorship in September 2004, which called for the withdrawal of Syrian forces and the disarming of Hezbollah. Given al-Hariri's close relationship with President Jacques Chirac, there was much speculation about al-Hariri's role in crafting, or at least promoting, the resolution.

As a direct result of the extension of Lahoud, political opposition to Syrian political domination began to coalesce, particularly around Walid Jumblatt, leader of Lebanon's two hundred thousand Druze. Jumblatt organized a series of opposition meetings in the fall of 2004 at Beirut's fashionable Bristol Hotel. Prime Minister al-Hariri did not attend, but he was widely known to have sent friends and proxies. The October 2004 attempt on the life of Jumblatt ally Marwan Hamade, one of twenty-nine deputies who voted against the extension, was universally understood as a warning to al-Hariri in particular, and to the opposition in general.

The opposition's defiance of Syria, in the face of Damascus's warnings, gained momentum that autumn, and al-Hariri was widely understood to be the opposition's de facto leader. He was feeling sufficiently confident in January 2005 to tell Rustum Ghazali, Syria's proconsul in Beirut from 2002 to 2005, that he would not accept any Syrian-imposed candidates on his list in the elections scheduled for May 2005. Rustum replied icily, "You have to think about it, and we have to think about it" (*New York Times*, March 22, 2005).

Rafiq al-Hariri's assassination by a car bomb explosion in Beirut on February 14, 2005, should be understood in the context of his status as the focus of Lebanese opposition to Syrian authority. There is little doubt that pro-Syrian political figures in Lebanon and their Syrian allies understood al-Hariri to be a serious threat to their political survival.

Syria, which held the political controls until its forces withdrew from Lebanon in April 2005, played a balance of power game in Lebanon and often promoted intra-and inter-sectarian divisions. The prospect of an organized coalition empowered to challenge Syrian authority would be ipso

facto a hostile act toward Syria. Syria's stakes in Lebanon extended well beyond security: Syrian officials were deeply enmeshed in networks of political corruption, smuggling, and crime, and were sensitive to developments that would jeopardize its Lebanese golden goose. In 2000, President Lahoud abruptly called off an anticorruption drive when it seemed to threaten Syria's friends (Gambill 2006a). When Prime Minister al-Hariri, in August 1997, asked this author for an appraisal of developments in Lebanon, and I cited the rampant corruption, he replied, "Some of the people in my cabinet are criminals and should be in jail, but I can't do anything about it." His claim of impotence, although transparently self-serving, also reflected his inability to defy Syria.

The initial wave of demonstrations following the death of al-Hariri and twenty-two others traveling in his entourage was met with celebratory chest-thumping and self-congratulation in Washington, where government officials anticipated the definitive overthrow of Syrian influence by a pro-American, democratic "Cedar Revolution." But within a few weeks the situation in Lebanon became much more complex when Hezbollah regained the initiative. Hezbollah expressed gratitude to Syria with a massive demonstration of Shi'i Muslims in Beirut on March 8, 2005, attended by some four hundred thousand people, according to journalists' estimates. Clearly many Lebanese do not object to Syrian hegemony. Indeed, Syria's influence over the country remains pervasive through its strategic coordination with Hezbollah and a coterie of pliant allies, including then-President Lahoud, Speaker Nabih Berri, and other major political figures such as former prime minister 'Umar Karami from Tripoli, in northern Lebanon where pro-Syrian sentiment is notable.

In response to the Hezbollah demonstration, and to mark the one-month anniversary of al-Hariri's assassination, the Cedar Revolutionaries organized a massive rally of their own in central Beirut, on March 14, attended by as many as a million people, according to widely shared estimates—incredibly, a full quarter of the country's population. Although the rally centered on Martyr's Square, where the Ottoman governor had hanged Lebanese nationalists nearly ninety years before, the city spilled over with the sea of demonstrators. There had not been a rally of similar scale in the Middle East since four million Egyptians turned out to bury their national singer, Umm Kulthoum, in 1975 (*al-Ahram*, February 6,

1975, 1). But that massive public gathering was in a country with ten times the population of today's Lebanon. The month of dueling mass demonstrations ended with mutual recognition that neither side would prevail and that a compromise was necessary.

A wildcard player in this volatile game was the former commander-in-chief of the Lebanese army, General Michel Aoun, a Maronite who had been in exile in France since the early 1990s and returned to Lebanon in time for parliamentary elections scheduled for May 2005. Aoun showed a penchant for overplaying his hand; he had blundered badly in Lebanese politics in the late 1980s by failing to reach out to the Shi'i, Sunni, and Druze communities, and instead launching terrible violence against his own citizens. He then recklessly challenged the Syrian Baathist regime in a "war of liberation" that had neither the support of key external or internal Lebanese players nor the means to succeed. In the process, Aoun alienated potential supporters in both Washington and his own country. Thus isolated, Aoun was forced into exile by Syria in 1990.

Aoun sustained a broad popular following in Lebanon during his exile years in France, especially among secular Christians but among the Muslim communities as well. He has been admired for his courage, honesty, and nationalism. When he returned to Lebanon in May 2005, shortly before the scheduled parliamentary elections, established politicians viewed him with trepidation because his populist following was seen as a potential threat. Aoun joined Nabih Berri and Hezbollah in calling for a delay in the election in order to revise the electoral law, which had been designed by Syria to insure that friendly politicians would be elected and to minimize opportunities for independent candidates to emerge, especially in the Christian community. Although Aoun's supporters comprised a significant proportion of the March 14 demonstration, and they certainly expected to see Aoun emerge as a major figure in any new government, it was all too clear that Aoun's Christian rivals had no intention of inviting him to join the government and thereby improve his odds for becoming president in 2007. Aoun found allies instead within the pro-Syrian "March 8 Group" (so named after the Hezbollah-organized mass demonstration of Shi'a on that date). They calculated that buying time might lead to splits in the rival "Cedar Revolution." Under U.S. pressure, the elections were held as scheduled and were won by the anti-Syrian coalition. Ironically, the victors

came to power by means of the very electoral system designed to preserve Syrian authority in Lebanon.

The May 2005 election produced three distinct blocs of votes. The Cedar Revolution, under the leadership of Saad al-Din al-Hariri, a son of the assassinated former prime minister, captured seventy-two seats, short of the two-thirds total needed to unseat the pro-Syrian president Lahoud. Amal and Hezbollah offered shared tickets and won thirty-five seats, whereas Michel Aoun aligned with pro-Syrian Christians in the North and sustained his important populist base in the Christian heartland, winning twenty-one seats. Aoun, having reasoned that his prior opposition to Syrian influence in Lebanon had been overtaken by events, counted on his new pro-Syrian stance to help forge an alliance with Hezbollah. This was consummated in February 2006, when the Aoun faction and Hezbollah signed a political pact pledging to work together to fight against corruption and for electoral and economic reform. It is significant that Hezbollah won Aoun's recognition as a legitimate party of national resistance, and held his support throughout the 2006 war and its aftermath. The new Hezbollah-Aoun coalition was in force in subsequent student elections in the universities, where Hezbollah supporters joined Aoun partisans to elect pro-Aoun candidates.

Meanwhile, the UN investigation of al-Hariri's killing roiled some key Lebanese power brokers politics. In August 2005, under orders from the first UN investigator, Detlev Mehlis, four powerful heads of the Lebanese intelligence and state police organizations were arrested, including General Jamil al-Sayyid, previously a man of enormous power who headed al-Amn al-'Amm (the General Security Directorate), often said to be the most fearsome intelligence agent in the country. The investigation was digging into the very quick of Syrian influence in Lebanon and thereby implicating senior Syrian figures, including President Bashar al-Asad. The dangers to Lebanese who pointed fingers at Syria were real and potentially lethal as underlined by a series of explosions, assassinations, and attempted assassinations, all targeting anti-Syrian personalities who had accused Syria of complicity in al-Hariri's murder. Following the killing of former prime minister al-Hariri, three leading public figures were blown up, including George Hawi, an aged leader of the Communist Party; Samir Kassir, a respected *an-Nahar* columnist; and Gibran Tueni, the *an-Nahar* publisher whose own columns passionately criticized Syria and Hezbollah. Tueni was

killed by a massive car bomb, only hours after he returned to Beirut from his Paris home.

Hezbollah, which then held two cabinet posts in the government, attempted to constrain the investigation by insisting that the Lebanese government maintain strict control of any tribunals operating in conjunction with it. When a majority of the Lebanese parliament passed a motion in December 2005 to authorize a mixed Lebanon-international tribunal, Hezbollah and Amal walked out of the cabinet, accused the body of being a “tyranny of the majority,” and insisted that all future action regarding the al-Hariri investigation proceed according to strict consensus. Hezbollah’s tactic froze the government for two months, until it was persuaded to return to the cabinet by Prime Minister Fouad Siniora. In return for Hezbollah’s renewed participation in the government, Siniora agreed never to refer to the organization as a “militia” but only as a “national resistance group,” thus effectively removing Hezbollah from being subjected to UN Security Council Resolution 1559, calling for the withdrawal of Syrian forces and the disarming of all militias in the country.

Setting the Stage for War

In the months before the summer of 2006 Beirut was preparing for a record summer tourist business. Unlike other popular Mediterranean destinations that feature package tours at cut-rate prices, Beirut’s hotel owners have generally been unwilling to offer bargains to “low-end” customers, instead targeting the more affluent tourists. After the 9/11 al-Qaeda attacks in 2001, the industry had great success attracting well-to-do Arab customers who were put off by heightened border security at American and other Western destinations. Beirut became a convenient and more culturally familiar playground. Wealthy visitors flocked to villas with signature red-tile roofs, apartments, hotels, and inns in mountainous villages, less than an hour from Beirut, and came down to the capital city to dine and play. Clearly Lebanon had recovered from the stigma of civil war and was back as a high-end tourist destination. Lebanese officials and politicians wanted to keep it that way, and Hezbollah insisted, publicly and repeatedly, that it would do nothing to jeopardize the bountiful summer trade.

Many of these same politicians were urging Hezbollah to disarm, especially after Syria pulled out its troops in April 2005. The group steadfastly refused, arguing that its armed wing was needed more than ever as the only credible force available to defend the country against an Israeli invasion. Hezbollah's position retains strong support in the South, but there are many detractors in the country as well. In the weeks before the outbreak of open hostilities with Israel in the summer of 2006, popular skepticism of Hezbollah's refusal to disarm turned to mockery, most notably in the June 1, 2006, television broadcast of a comedy program where an actor in the role of a *sayyid* (a descendant of the prophet Muhammad), and looking very much like a younger Hasan Nasrallah, held forth on a variety of preposterous reasons why Hezbollah would not give up its weapons. Within hours, tens of thousands of Hezbollah sympathizers demonstrated around the country to protest the disrespect implied for Sayyid Hasan. The incident clearly revealed the exposed nerves of the Shi'i community, where memories of marginalization and second-class citizenship remain vivid. Nasrallah, for his part, did not hide his pique. The incident whetted Hezbollah's appetite for a dramatic coup de théâtre directed at its arch enemy that would allow the organization to reclaim its honor and make its militia appear all the more essential.

On the Israeli side, the desire within the country's political and military leadership to have it out with Hezbollah increased markedly in 2005 and early 2006. Israeli officials have endured Hezbollah's taunting ever since their unilateral withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000, and have found Nasrallah's May 2000 comparison of Israel with a fragile "spider's web" especially grating. The last straw for Israeli officials seems to have been a series of secretly monitored communications between Hezbollah and Hamas, the Palestinian Islamist group, in the spring and early summer of 2006. In these exchanges the Hezbollah leadership urged the Palestinians to hang tough in negotiations with Israel over the return of an Israeli soldier captured in June 2006. In these same exchanges Nasrallah referred to Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Defense Minister Amir Peretz as weak (Hersh 2006, 30). When these communications came to light within Israeli leadership circles, along with reports by respected analysts that Hezbollah was developing a "first-strike" capacity to unleash massive, preemptive rocket attacks on Israel (Gambill 2006b, 2), the Israelis were less inclined to

respect the rules of the game with Hezbollah that had been respected after the 2000 withdrawal. Investigative reporter Seymour Hersh refers to a meeting in the early summer of 2006 in Washington in which U.S. and Israeli officials made plans for a crushing attack on Hezbollah (Hersh 2006). It is unclear how much operational coordination took place at this meeting, if any, but there is little doubt that officials on both sides found the prospect of inflicting a devastating blow on Hezbollah very appetizing.

Tensions between Israel and Hezbollah had, in fact, been growing for months before the start of large-scale hostilities on July 12, 2006. In November 2005 Hezbollah tried to capture several Israeli soldiers in the border village of Ghajar, which sits astride the Lebanese border with the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. The operation, thwarted by the Israeli army, represented Hezbollah's attempt to redeem its *wa'd al-sadiq* ("faithful promise") to secure the release of Lebanese prisoners in Israeli jails, including Samir Kuntar, one of the terrorists responsible for a 1979 attack in Nahariya, Israel, that killed four members of an Israeli family.

In late May 2006, Hezbollah fired on an Israeli border post, wounding an Israeli soldier. A typical response to such an incident—according to the "rules of the game" developed between the two sides over the years since the Israeli withdrawal of 2000—would have the Israeli army shelling a few Hezbollah positions and command and control centers. In this instance, however, Israel opted for a more robust response, shelling twenty Hezbollah positions along the border and destroying many of them. Hezbollah responded by upping the ante still further by launching eight Katyusha rockets at Safad, the location of the Israeli army's northern headquarters. Five of these notoriously inaccurate rockets actually hit an antennae farm near the headquarters and sent a clear reminder to Israel of the nature of Hezbollah's arsenal, which was reported to include at least twelve thousand rockets—mostly short-range Katyushas but also various longer-range rockets, notably the Iranian-supplied Zelzal-2 with a range of up to 210 kilometers. Both sides were clearly itching for a fight.

The Start of Hostilities, July 2006

Hezbollah's dramatic operation of July 12, 2006, was yet another attempt to deliver on its *wa'd al-sadiq*, but launching the attack on Israeli soil was also

intended to demonstrate the organization's formidable offensive abilities and its tenacity, while at the same time appealing to Lebanese critics of the organization who had been calling on it to disarm. From a tactical standpoint, the operation was a stunning success. Hezbollah militants ambushed a motorized Israeli patrol in an unpopulated area of northern Israel on its border with Lebanon, capturing two Israeli soldiers and killing three others. After the Israeli Defense Forces pursued the militants into Lebanon on a rescue mission, five more soldiers were killed and a state-of-the-art Merkava tank destroyed.

Hezbollah's leadership group had clearly stretched the rules of the game by conducting the daring raid on Israeli soil. Although it anticipated Israeli retaliation, the leadership expected to be able to ride it out. Initially Hezbollah's goal seemed to have been achieved to perfection. The response to Hezbollah's *al-wa'd al-madhkur* ("promise remembered") in al-dahiya of Beirut was jubilant. But as Hezbollah's Lebanese critics would soon point out, and as Nasrallah himself would later admit, Hezbollah had made a major miscalculation.

By July 13, Israel began its retaliatory offensive against Hezbollah, and it soon became clear that the assault went well beyond what Nasrallah and company anticipated. Within a day Lebanon was blockaded from the sea, and the Beirut airport was hit, effectively closing it. Shortly after Nasrallah's offices were bombed on July 14, Hezbollah released a recorded statement from Nasrallah that was far from conciliatory: "You wanted an open war, and we are heading for an open war. We are ready for it." Nasrallah invited listeners to look to the sea, and with perfect theatrical timing, an explosion on the horizon rocked the INS *Hanit*, an Israeli naval vessel that was hit by an Iranian-produced C-802 Noor guided missile. The ship was disabled and four of its sailors killed. This was an early hint that Hezbollah might have been better prepared than Israel presumed.

With the initial outbreak of open hostilities, Israel enjoyed broad international support and Hezbollah attracted widespread international condemnation for violating Israeli territory and snatching the soldiers. Israel's unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon six years earlier allowed it some moral superiority on this score. Strong U.S. support was, of course, expected and instantly evident. Less predictable was the quick disapproval of Hezbollah's action voiced by key Arab states, including Saudi Arabia.

The Saudi government criticized Hezbollah's "uncalculated adventures" (*al-Watan*, July 14, 2006), and Jordan, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates followed suit. This coalition between the Americans and the Arab states was held together by convergent interests. The Sunni Arab governments were understandably apprehensive about the rising profile of the Shi'ite power Iran in the Arab world, the emergence of a Shi'i-dominated government in American-occupied Iraq, and the influence of Hezbollah in Lebanon. All these forces might well inspire domestic opposition forces in their own countries, especially as Hezbollah gained enthusiastic support even among the vast Sunni population of the Arab world. In the same vein, America and its Israeli ally wished to decapitate Hezbollah and indeed deal a humiliating blow to an Iranian ally in Lebanon that might inspire hostile groups in Iraq.

In his first long interview after the outbreak of hostilities, on al-Jazeera television on July 21, 2006, Hezbollah leader Nasrallah referred to the widely broadcast Arab disapproval as a "surprise," and he subtly alluded to his failure to anticipate the scale of the Israeli response. As Nasrallah said, "The Israeli reaction to the capture could have been harsh but limited, were it not for the international and Arab cover."

Prosecuting the War

Israel's war plan depended heavily on its air power and on artillery bombardment from northern Israel into Lebanon. Its military objectives were to isolate the battlefield by cutting off routes of resupply for Hezbollah, striking Hezbollah's rocket arsenal (especially its long-range rockets capable of striking far into Israel), hitting Hezbollah's media instruments (such as the television station al-Manar) and command and control, and creating a "killing box" in southern Lebanon where Hezbollah could be destroyed in detail by bombing and shelling. These objectives allowed for Israeli strikes on roads, bridges, seaports, and airports throughout Lebanon, as well as on the densely populated al-dahiya, where many of Hezbollah command and control centers were thought to be located. Israel also struck al-Manar television repeatedly throughout the war, but except for an interruption of several minutes, the station never went off the air. On July 15, Israeli bombs targeted the home of Ayatollah Fadlallah, destroying it. The bombing of this home surprised Lebanese

analysts, as Fadlallah's relations with Nasrallah were known to be tense as a result of Fadlallah's criticism of Hezbollah's periodic political inflexibility.

Within days of the start of the Israeli military response, hundreds of targets had been struck across southern Lebanon, around Beirut, in the Beqaa valley, and even in northern Lebanon. The population of the South and al-dahiya was forced to flee en masse to relative safety wherever it could be found, often in schools or parking garages, if not with friends and relatives. Israel's plan in establishing its "killing box" in the South was clearly to force out all civilians. To that end Israel not only struck gasoline stations and possible militia positions, but it also hit food stores, as though to ensure that the civilians could not endure a siege. Hezbollah responded by firing rockets at Israel, usually at least one hundred and fifty rockets a day, but two hundred and fifty rockets on the last day of the war. In an unprecedented response, on July 16, Hezbollah struck the city of Haifa, home to nearly 275,000 people with longer-range rockets provided by Syria and Iran. Eight people died in the first attack on Israel's third largest city. Hezbollah's Zelzal-2 rockets could strike Tel Aviv, although none were fired, and the Israeli army claims to have destroyed most of them in the first days of the war. The advantage of the short-range Katyusha is that it can be fired in about a minute, far quicker than Israeli detection equipment can find it, whereas the larger rockets require a more elaborate launcher and much more time. Facing an enemy with complete air superiority and plenty of detection capability, the larger rockets were harder to fire successfully.

The day after Haifa was hit by rocket fire, Prime Minister Olmert addressed the Knesset and stated his goals as the return of the two captured soldiers, a complete ceasefire, meaning the end of Hezbollah's presence close to Israel's border with Lebanon; the deployment of the Lebanese army in the South; and the expulsion of Hezbollah from the South. He emphasized his determination to see to the elimination of Hezbollah as a military force and to the dismantling of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias, as required by UN Security Council Resolution 1559. At the United Nations, Israeli Ambassador Dan Gillerman, a frequent guest on American television news programs, echoed his prime minister's sentiments by repeatedly referring to Hezbollah as a cancer that would have to be cut out. The Israelis certainly have no monopoly on this sort of language; Hezbollah propaganda routinely refers to Israel as a cancer (Qassem 2005,

15). What Gillerman and his prime minister revealed in their comments was the common expectation that Hezbollah somehow could be expunged from Lebanon. The Israelis were eager to persuade a credulous White House that this was entirely realistic. In confidential discussions with the White House, Israel promised President Bush a “quick and decisive” result (author’s private sources) and reportedly told Condoleezza Rice: “You did it in about 70 days [in Kosovo], but we need half of that—35 days” (Hersh 2006, 31).

Israeli efforts to excise the “cancer” of Hezbollah proved as deadly as misapplied chemotherapy for a cancer patient. The turning point might have been the Israeli bombing of Qana on July 30, killing twenty-eight civilians. After this tragedy, support for Israel’s campaign in the Arab capitals melted under the heat of public outrage and demonstration. For instance, in Egypt, scores of demonstrations erupted around the country in late July and August. Although none of them were massive—the largest involved eight thousand demonstrators—the widespread underlying anger and foment in response to the July war shook the Mubarak regime and prompted a reversal of tone.

Hezbollah proved more resilient than the Israeli analysts had predicted. Israeli Brigadier General Guy Zur, commander of the 162d Armored Division that fought in Lebanon, described Hezbollah as “by far the greatest guerrilla group in the world” (*USA Today*, September 14, 2006). After more than a month of Israeli bombardment, Hezbollah emerged with its support intact, if not bolstered, in the Shi‘i community. Its impressive and rapid response to the needs of those whose homes and lives were ravaged—mostly but not all Shi‘i Muslims—further consolidated Hezbollah’s impressive base of support. Its fighters left IOUs for items taken from shops during the war. One shopkeeper from Debin, a small village in the South, reported receiving \$1,000 for redeemed IOUs (Leenders 2006, 46). More important, Hezbollah paid \$10,000 to \$12,000 to anyone losing their home. As many as fifteen thousand homeless families received the grants. Affiliated architects and engineers planned the construction of new homes, doctors dispensed free medicine, and about twenty-five thousand free meals were distributed daily in the weeks following the ceasefire.

By the time a UN-and Lebanon-brokered ceasefire was finally in place in mid-August 2006, Israel and the United States were forced to dramatically scale back their demands and expectations for the war’s

outcome. Indeed, a “seven-point plan” promulgated by the Lebanese government, preserving the sovereign prerogatives of Lebanon, would decisively shape the ceasefire. The centerpiece for the ending of the war was the decision in UN Security Council Resolution 1701 to enhance an existing peacekeeping force in southern Lebanon, the UNIFIL, which was first created in 1978 to oversee an Israeli withdrawal after its Litani Operation. With heavy European involvement, the UN force would become UNIFIL on steroids, or so the architects of Resolution 1701 hoped. In practice, however, the force is explicitly prohibited from taking any action to disarm Hezbollah without Lebanese government approval—and this was highly unlikely to be forthcoming.

Outsiders often forget that the Lebanese have suffered tremendously under Israeli attacks for three decades, and so one of UNIFIL’s key tasks was to insure that Lebanese civilians are permitted to peacefully return to and rebuild their devastated villages. Given Hezbollah’s broad base of support, and the fact that its Lebanese supporters see no other force that can thwart Israel should it decide to re-ignite the war, it is completely unrealistic that the new international contingents will succeed either in disarming Hezbollah or in diminishing its appeal. If UNIFIL is going to succeed, it will need the cooperation—not the animosity—of Hezbollah. For its part, Hezbollah formally declared its agreement, with the provision that any of its members who are found carrying arms may be detained and disarmed. In effect, what was being pursued is a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy. The major question was whether UNIFIL-plus would operate not only competently but fairly. The key to restoring stability to southern Lebanon was not only to see Hezbollah stand down but also for the new force to avoid being seen as an instrument of Israeli influence or occupation.

UN Resolution 1702 also provided for the deployment of the Lebanese army in force to the South, as Israel demanded, but the army were deployed, as several of its generals noted, to work *bi-ta‘awun ma‘al-muqawama* (in cooperation with “the resistance,” meaning Hezbollah). This is not surprising, as about half the rank and file of the Lebanese army are Shi‘i Muslims and the resistance was popular with the army.

The war that broke out between Israel and Hezbollah during the summer of 2006 lasted thirty-four days. During this time half the population of northern Israel was displaced (approximately 500,000 people) and southern

Lebanon was largely emptied of its civilian population—900,000 people were evacuated, or nearly one-quarter of Lebanon's population. By the war's end, 43 Israeli and 1,109 Lebanese civilians had been killed. The military casualties included 118 Israeli and 28 Lebanese soldiers, and roughly 200 Hezbollah fighters. Israel claims to have killed as many as 500 Hezbollah militants in July and August of 2006, but independent and reliable sources judge this number to be too high. Material losses were considerable, totaling approximately \$500 million in Israel and about \$4 billion in Lebanon, which saw the undoing of fifteen years of post-civil war reconstruction. About 900 factories were hit and 15,000 homes severely damaged or destroyed.²

Both sides paid a heavy price for the war, with Lebanon paying the heaviest by far. But it was a war without an unequivocal winner. Both Israel and Hezbollah went to war to bolster their credibility and perceived ability to deter enemies, yet in neither case did they fully succeed. Each side seriously misread its adversary. After the war of arms ended, the war of words began, as each side struggled to persuade friend and foe alike of their victory, revealing the fragility of the claims of both sides.

Postwar Reactions

The Islamic month of Ramadan, a time of daily fasting and reflection on the meaning of the Quran and the mercy of Allah, began in late September 2006 and concluded a month later with the traditional three-day feast. Throughout the Islamic world, families and friends gathered for the *iftar*, the breaking of the fast, at dusk. Following the meal it is customary for guests and hosts to chat about religion and the issues of the day. In many homes these discussions turn into long debates. This was certainly the case in Cairo, where the author lived during the fall of 2006 and where many *iftar* discussions focused on the July war in Lebanon. A month and a half after the August 14 ceasefire, many Egyptians were still outraged at the suffering inflicted on the Lebanese and the unwillingness of the U.S. to join international efforts aimed at an early ceasefire. In solidly middle-and upper-class Muslim homes, where secular values were often openly embraced, televisions were more commonly tuned to the BBC World Service or al-Arabiya (a less polemical rival to al-Jazeera) than to

Hezbollah's al-Manar, but Hezbollah still received widespread respect, even admiration, for its success in confronting Israel.

Admiration of Hezbollah was seen not only in the homes of privileged Cairenes. Throughout Egypt in July and August there were dozens of demonstrations to protest the war or express solidarity with the Lebanese and often with Hezbollah. On August 4, 2006, for instance, demonstrations in Cairo involving about eight thousand people were timed to coincide with parallel ones in Baghdad, Amman, and Damascus. Many of the demonstrations were organized by the Society of Muslim Brothers, a venerable Egyptian Sunni Muslim group, but they were also joined by non-Islamist opposition groups including the Kefaya movement. If the demonstrations over the course of the war engaged tens of thousands of Egyptians, they were only the most obvious manifestation of a seething anger among the broader public. Egyptians talked openly about this reaction to the Lebanon war after the August ceasefire. What was most remarkable about the demonstrations in Egypt and elsewhere was that the Sunni Muslims publicly expressed solidarity for a trademark Shi'i party. The presumed Sunni-Shi'i sectarian divide that fascinates a variety of pundits and scholars proved to be a marginal phenomenon, whereas Hezbollah's example of resistance and its rejection of quiescence catalyzed support among many Sunni (cf. V. Nasr 2006). Muhammad Mahdi Akef, the Cairo-based Supreme Guide of the Brothers, issued a strong statement in favor of Hezbollah and even promised to send ten thousand men to fight in Lebanon (although none was actually dispatched). Shaikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the Egyptian-born Sunni cleric whose television program is seen by a vast Arab audience on al-Jazeera, insisted on Sunni-Shi'i cooperation, castigated the Saudi regime for its criticism of Hezbollah, and fulminated against Arab regimes in general for their weakness.

The Brothers' support illustrates precisely why ruling elites in the Islamic world find Hezbollah so worrisome, namely, that it may inspire copycat dissent movements in their own societies, especially if sectarian divisions become less salient and pan-Islamic sentiments grow. In Saudi Arabia, during the July war, in an attempt to forestall Shi'i-Sunni solidarity, the regime reiterated the admonition of some anti-Shi'i clerics that Saudi Muslims were not permitted to pray for Shi'i Hezbollah.

As the war between Israel and Hezbollah continued into August 2006, swelling anger against Israel and resentment of Arab governments for accrediting Israel's offensive forced the Egyptian government to backtrack in its public statements about the conflict. President Husni Mubarak downplayed his earlier criticisms of Hezbollah and began criticizing Israel for its "disproportionate" attacks on Lebanon. A seventy-member Egyptian delegation led by the heir apparent to the presidency, Gamal Mubarak, arrived in Beirut in early August to show solidarity with Lebanon. Similar backtracking was under way in Jordan and Saudi Arabia, where, by late July, public expressions of solidarity with the Lebanese and Hezbollah were given by Saudi officials, albeit grudgingly. Although some ultraconservative clerics throughout the Sunni world still refused to countenance prayers on behalf of the "heretical" Shi'a, others were less reticent to encourage solidarity.

In Damascus, where Hezbollah's Secretary-General Nasrallah was already a popular figure, the July war prompted a rush on souvenir paraphernalia, including key rings, shirts, buttons, bumper stickers, and posters featuring either Nasrallah alone or alongside Syrian President Bashar al-Asad and his father, the late Hafez al-Asad. Nasrallah was widely celebrated as a latter-day Salah al-Din (Saladin), the Kurdish general widely seen in the Arab world as a great hero for his liberation of Jerusalem from the Crusaders in 1187.

Hezbollah's example of military strength against Israel also galvanized Palestinians living under Israeli occupation. As in the past, when successful resistance in southern Lebanon helped to inspire Palestinian militants to wage their own uprising against Israel, pro-Hezbollah sentiment exploded in the Palestinian territories on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Hezbollah posters and graffiti spread throughout the occupied territories, and Hezbollah-run al-Manar television enjoyed a boost in Palestinian viewership, though al-Jazeera remains more popular by far. Most Palestinians were behind the Shi'i organization despite ambivalence within the Palestinian Authority, where there was concern that the Lebanese battle shifted Western media attention away from Palestinian suffering under U.S.-orchestrated sanctions. Nevertheless, Fatah president Farouk Qaddoumi, speaking to some of the more than two hundred thousand Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, embraced Hezbollah's "success" in the

war (*Daily Star*, July 30, 2006). Within Palestine itself a local pop-music group, *firqat al-shimal* (the “Band of the North”), recorded a tribute to Nasrallah, “Saqr Lubnan” (The Hawk of Lebanon), that became a runaway hit in the West Bank. The lyrics celebrate “the boldness and courage that characterizes this battle [as] Islamic courage,” exclaiming that the Palestinians only want a “free life” and that they welcome death in order to achieve it.³ Concerned about the growing influence of Hezbollah within the territories, Israeli occupation forces began checking cell phones of young Palestinians and arresting those with Nasrallah screensavers.

In other Arab settings in the months following the war, CDs containing speeches by Nasrallah outsold recent recordings by popular Lebanese singers Nancy Ajram and Haifa Wahbe, and the speeches themselves influenced Arab pop culture. Nasrallah’s tribute to Hezbollah fighters in the first days of the war inspired a wildly popular song by the Lebanon-based Julia Boutros titled “Ahibba’i” (“My Beloved Ones”). Its lyrics include the lines “I want to kiss your heads and kiss your fingers on the triggers.”⁴

Strong support for Hezbollah during and after the July war was also apparent within Iraq’s Shi‘i community. The leading Shi‘i religious leader Ayatollah Sistani issued a *fatwa* on July 16, 2006, condemning the Israeli attack on Lebanon as disproportionate and authorizing his deputies (*wakils*) to collect alms for humanitarian assistance to the Lebanese. Since Sistani is by far the most revered cleric in Iraq (as well as a highly influential figure among Shi‘a in Lebanon),⁵ his ruling effectively validated the shared identity of non-Lebanese Shi‘a with their brethren in Lebanon.

Hezbollah has also been embraced by the firebrand Iraqi Shi‘i cleric Muqtada al-Sadr and his loyal supporters in the impoverished suburbs of Baghdad. His scholarly credentials as a Shi‘i cleric are weak, but as the son of the revered Ayatollah Muhammad al-Sadr (assassinated in 1999, reputedly under orders from Saddam Hussein), Muqtada has inherited his father’s broad social support base among what his relative Musa al-Sadr referred to a generation ago in Lebanon as the *al-mahrumin* (the deprived). On August 4, 2006, Muqtada led a demonstration in Baghdad that included about one hundred thousand of his followers, who chanted “death to Israel” as Muqtada railed against what he called *al-muthallath al-mash’um* (“the evil triangle”), presumably a jibe at George W. Bush’s “Axis of Evil” and a

reference to the United States, Israel, and the Arab states supporting Israel's campaign in Lebanon.

Hezbollah in a Fractured Postwar Lebanon

In contrast to the celebrations of Hezbollah's "victory" in the wider Arab world, within Lebanon adulation of Hezbollah was far from universal. Although the organization benefited from pan-Lebanese expressions of solidarity and anti-Israel feeling during the armed conflict and in the weeks after the ceasefire, cross-confessional solidarity faded quickly as Lebanese began to openly question Hezbollah's role in provoking the war. It was hard to celebrate a "victory" in the face of a reconstruction bill now estimated at \$4 billion. The war was an economic calamity for the country. It required three years to complete most of the infrastructure repairs, which included the rebuilding of some seventy-eight bridges. The war sabotaged the tourist season of 2006, representing, according to reliable estimates, a loss of \$2 billion in income. Tourism suffered in subsequent years as travelers weighed the risks of a visit to Lebanon against other, less conflict-prone locales. And further mitigating any sense of triumph was the human cost of the war—1,109 dead civilians and 15,000 displaced families whose homes were destroyed or badly damaged.

The war, in fact, split Lebanon in two. One Lebanon was represented by a coalition of mainly Sunnis, Druze, and Christians that coalesced following the assassination of the former prime minister and Sunni Muslim Rafiq al-Hariri. This is the so-called Cedar Revolution that united in reaction to al-Hariri's murder to demand a full investigation into the assassination, and to call on Syrian forces to leave Lebanon. This group, which won the 2005 parliamentary elections by capturing 72 of 128 seats, was in power during the 2006 war. Many of its members considered Hezbollah's provocative actions, including the July 12 ambush in Israel, as a "coup d'état." They accuse the Shi'i group of being an agent of Syria and Iran, with the ultimate aim of installing a theocratic Islamic Republic on the shores of the Mediterranean.

The other Lebanon was also a coalition, consisting of much of the Shi'i community and large elements of the Christian community—especially the many followers of the magnetic Maronite politician and former general

Michel Aoun. This coalition was somewhat confusingly called the March 8 Group, in commemoration of the large demonstration led by Hezbollah and Amal on March 8, 2005, ostensibly to respect al-Hariri's memory but also to thank Syria for its supposed role in maintaining peace in the country. In fact, the Aounists probably comprised close to half of the one million people who participated in the massive March 14, 2005, demonstration that made the Cedar Revolution a phenomenon known 'round the world. When their leader, General Aoun, was shut out of the government after the 2005 elections, they shifted to the opposition. After that, Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement showed considerable strength in university-student elections, and in the important professional associations of lawyers, doctors, and engineers. The "Aounists" and the Shi'a shared a profound sense of victimization in the face of what they saw as a corrupt and unresponsive political system. They worked together to expand their share of power in significant measure at the expense of the Sunni Muslims.

Timur Goksel, a Turk who served for twenty-five years as political adviser to UNIFIL and who was respected for his sage reflections on Lebanese politics, observed:

Now that the war is over, any hope for a true national unity in Lebanon has again become a dream. Nasrallah's repeated calls for a strong central state free of corruption, and able to protect Lebanon, as a prerequisite for his party to give up its weapons usually generates knowing smiles from those who believe that Lebanon's "tribalism" is not going to change any time soon. The Maronite-Sunni-Druze coalition that is the majority in the parliament has a single priority now: to stop Hezbollah from using its arms and recently enhanced political standing from changing the sectarian system's domestic political and economic balances.⁶

Hezbollah, meanwhile, rejected blame for precipitating the July 2006 war. Nasrallah claimed that Israel had been preparing an attack on Hezbollah even months before the capture of the Israeli soldiers on July 12, 2006. Israel, it was alleged, used the capture as a convenient pretext to launch its failed campaign of annihilation. In a remarkable interview on Lebanese television, on August 27, 2006, however, Nasrallah took a very

different tack and conceded that his organization had miscalculated: “If any of us [on the fifteen-member political-military council] had a 1 percent concern that Israel was going to reply in this savage manner we would not have captured those soldiers.” At the same time, Hezbollah accused the ruling coalition of complicity in an American-and Israeli-led plot to destroy the organization.

Nasrallah used this same television interview to attempt to reassure his fellow Lebanese that Hezbollah’s weapons were only for fighting the Israeli enemy and would not be “pointed” at fellow Lebanese. These words were coupled, however, with a demand for a “national unity” government that would include representatives of the political party of Hezbollah’s main Christian ally, Michel Aoun. His opponents were not reassured, claiming that the insistence on a national unity parliamentary coalition run by strict consensus—thus granting Hezbollah veto power—was tantamount to bullying the current government out of existence. Prime Minister Fouad Siniora and his coalition partners further accused Nasrallah of serving Syria’s interests by precipitating a political crisis, thereby disrupting the efforts of the present Lebanese government to authorize an international tribunal to try suspects in the killing of former prime minister al-Hariri.

Both sides dug in their heels as the political stakes of the showdown were, in fact, high. Hezbollah was using its arms and enhanced political standing in the Islamic world to attempt to change the delicate political balance of Lebanon’s sectarian government in its favor. And the ruling Maronite-Sunni-Druze coalition is doing what it can to block such change. The veteran political observer Sofia Saadeh put the dilemma quite clearly:

When there is a demographic change in this country ... the constitution does not explain how this can be translated at the level of politics. Since the Lebanese system revolves around the sects sharing power, this is a very crucial shortcoming. So, every time a sect wants to move forward and upward in the political hierarchy, we end up with strife. In a regular democracy, the votes will tell you which direction to take. Unfortunately, in Lebanon, there is no such mechanism. The ascendancy of the Shi‘i is being fought by the Sunnis.⁷

The fall of 2006 was marked by an escalation of tension and demands. On October 31, Nasrallah's call for a national unity government turned into a blatant ultimatum: the government must either agree to a new consensus arrangement, with a Hezbollah veto over all government measures, or face widespread demonstrations and other forms of organized pressure such as blocking the route to the national airport. Prior to the resignation of an allied Christian member, and in conjunction with these demands, all five Shi'i members of the government resigned from the cabinet, leaving even the legal status of the rump government in question. Because the al-Ta'if agreement, which formally ended the civil war in 1989, required every major sect to participate in government, the departure of the Shi'a prompted the pro-Hezbollah president Lahoud to assert that the government was no longer legitimate and could not undertake major initiatives—including the seating of an international tribunal.

The postwar crisis took a deadly turn on November 21, 2006, with the assassination of thirty-three-year-old Pierre Gemayel, the Lebanese minister of industry. The slain minister was the son of Amin Gemayel, a former president, and grandson and namesake of the founder of the Phalange militia, the largest Christian-led militia during the civil war. The victim had frequently criticized Hezbollah and Syria, and was the fifth and most recent prominent critic of Syrian involvement in Lebanon who was assassinated since 2005. Many fingers understandably pointed at Syria, which had demonstrated a penchant for eradicating its Lebanese adversaries. This time, however, some informed observers were skeptical about Syria's culpability, especially as reports surfaced suggesting that Gemayel held confidential talks with Hezbollah political ally Michel Aoun in the weeks preceding his gangland-style killing. If true, the reports imply that Lebanese rivals might have been responsible. Whoever was responsible, the killing increased fears among Lebanese that they were edging toward an eruption of wider violence. One hopeful sign was found in the wisdom of Pierre Gemayel's father, former president Amin Gemayel, who called upon the tens of thousands of mourners and supporters that gathered at Martyr's Square in Beirut to abjure revenge. Although he refused a condolence call from General Aoun, he did speak with Hasan Nasrallah—whose son, Hadi, was killed fighting Israel—and the two found common emotional ground, according to press reports.

Nonetheless, the joint effort by Hezbollah, Amal, and the Aounists to topple the Siniora government picked up steam as December began with a massive peaceful protest gathering in downtown Beirut. With Prime Minister Fouad Siniora and many of his ministers hunkered down in their offices in the Grand Serail, the Ottoman-era seat of government, fearful that their offices would be occupied if they vacated, half a million Shi'a and Christians (with Shi'a predominating) vowed to stay put until the government succumbed to pressure and either accepted a national unity government or agreed to call elections.

¹ For some details surrounding this intriguing episode, see the *Jerusalem Post*, October 23, 2003; and <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/news.php?id=66727>.

² See http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/5257128.stm.

³ An MP3 version of the song is available at <http://netzoo.net/the-hawk-of-lebanon/>.

⁴ For the lyrics, see <http://www.julia.ws/>.

⁵ Precise figures on those who follow or “imitate” (*taqlid*) Sistani in Lebanon are not available, but he certainly enjoys a broader following than Lebanon’s widely respected Ayatollah Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah, who died in 2010, or even the Iranian supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, whom Hezbollah considers the official source for Islamic law. This author’s impression, based on informal interviews and discussion with a wide variety of Lebanese Shi’a, was that, as of November 2006, at least 60 percent of all Lebanese followed Sistani, with a significant minority following Fadlallah. Since then, a growing number consider themselves “imitators” of Khamenei, which reflects Iran’s higher profile in Lebanon and Hezbollah’s dominance.

⁶ Interview by Internet, October 8, 2006.

⁷ Interview by author, November 13, 2006, Beirut.

Chapter 7

Acclaim Gives Way to Enmity

The tent city that Hezbollah and its Muslim and Christian allies erected in downtown Beirut in early December 2006 signaled the opposition's resolve to topple the government of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora. Nightly rallies featured a who's who of opposition notables. Initially, exuberant villagers enjoyed the novelty of riding free buses to rallies in upscale central Beirut, where some would stay for days at a time. One month later, just two days before an international donors' conference was to open in Paris, Hezbollah increased its pressure on the Siniora government by leading widespread demonstrations to protest the government's failure to address the needs of those displaced six months earlier, in the July 2006 war between Hezbollah and Israel. In a belligerent speech the night before the planned demonstrations, Hasan Nasrallah argued that the Paris conference would shackle Lebanon with political conditions and threaten the country's independence. He implied that the perfidy of the Siniora government was proven by its presence in Paris.

The next day scattered violence erupted around the campus of the Lebanese University, where an altercation sparked wider Sunni-Shi'i clashes and several deaths. Lebanese police and especially the army performed admirably to curtail clashes, but angry partisans were ready to fight. Nasrallah appeared on television and urged his followers off the streets, insisting that it was a religious duty for them to comply.



As Lebanese government and opposition figures negotiated in Doha in May 2008, the Union of the Disabled held demonstrations in Beirut with a theme that captured a widely held sentiment: “If you don’t agree, don’t come back.” Courtesy of Getty Images.

The clashes of January 2007 revealed how sharply the level of distrust had risen between Lebanese Shi‘a and Sunni since the July 2006 war. The tension encouraged the growth of militant Sunni groups that viewed the Shi‘a with contempt. These groups have been concentrated in the impoverished northern region of the country and in the twelve Palestinian refugee camps where living conditions are often miserable (there are about 450,000 registered Palestinian refugees in Lebanon).¹ In Tripoli, the country’s second largest city, Sunni Islamist groups incited followers to attack *rawafid* (“rejecters,” a derogatory term for Shi‘i Muslims) following clashes with Shi‘i allies of Hezbollah.

One militant Sunni group, Fatah al-Islam—based in the Nahr al-Barid refugee camp near Tripoli—attacked an army unit in May 2007, killing several soldiers. In the wake of this incident, the Lebanese army responded forcefully. The army launched an assault on Fatah al-Islam, which controlled several blocks of the sprawling camp. The group put up fierce

resistance to the lightly armed army. It was only in early September, after more than three months of fighting, that the militants succumbed. By then, 168 soldiers were killed, scores of innocent Palestinians had lost their homes, and the camp had been devastated, with more than 250 dead—many of them civilians.

The army is one of Lebanon's few revered national institutions. It enjoyed robust public support during the Nahr al-Barid fighting, but its limited capabilities were on display. Vietnam-era helicopters were used to drop bombs because the Lebanese air force does not have a single airworthy combat aircraft. Early in the battle the army ran out of ammunition and was able to continue the battle only because the United States airlifted munitions to Lebanon. For many Shi'a, as I was reminded in discussions in May 2008 during visits to southern Lebanese villages, the army's modest capacity lent substance to the argument that Hezbollah is more capable of defending Lebanon than the national army.

While the fighting was under way in the north, United Nations peacekeepers serving in the south with UNIFIL suffered a blow in late June 2007. A road side bomb killed six UNIFIL peacekeepers. The attack was probably the work of a militant Sunni group, perhaps in retaliation for the Nahr al-Barid campaign. UNIFIL, beefed up as part of the arrangements for ending the Israeli-Hezbollah war in 2006, was charged with insuring that Hezbollah did not reconstitute an armed presence adjacent to the Israeli-Lebanese border. Nonetheless, the June attack prompted several of the national military contingents in UNIFIL to quietly bolster informal liaison arrangements with Hezbollah in order to benefit from its well-oiled intelligence network and its help in forestalling future attacks. The threat remains palpable. In April 2008, Ayman al-Zawahiri renewed al-Qaeda's call for attacks on "Crusaders and Jews," specifically including UNIFIL.

The attacks on the peacekeepers came a few weeks after Walid Eido, a Sunni member of parliament and government supporter, was killed by a car bomb on Beirut's popular seaside corniche, along with nine other victims. Lebanese politics continued to be a dangerous profession. In September 2007, Antoine Ghanem, a Maronite member of parliament and, like Eido, a supporter of the government, was blown up along with eight bystanders in Sin al-Fil, a respectable professional district in East Beirut. Ghanem was the

fourth legislator killed in less than two years, a chain of killings widely, if not universally, ascribed by the Lebanese to Syria.

The month before Ghanem's death, a by-election was held in the Metn, the overwhelmingly Christian district that is a part of Mount Lebanon as well as the home base of former president Amin Gemayel. Amin's son Pierre was assassinated in November 2006 and Amin was the odds-on favorite to win this election to fill his son's vacant seat. The thirty-three-year-old Pierre Gemayel had been the minister of industry, and the grandson and namesake of the founder of the Phalange party, the largest Christian-led militia during the civil war. He had frequently criticized Hezbollah and Syria, and he was the fifth prominent figure assassinated since 2005. Many fingers pointed at Syria, which has demonstrated a penchant for eradicating its Lebanese adversaries. Reports also surfaced that in the weeks preceding his gangland-style slaying, Pierre Gemayel held confidential talks with retired General Michel Aoun, the popular Christian opposition leader and opposition ally of Hezbollah. Dr. Kamil Khoury, Amin's obscure opponent, was endorsed by Aoun. With more than 50 percent of eligible voters participating, Khoury won the election by a whisker of 418 votes out of about 78,000 cast. As the one-seat contest highlighted, factionalism often divides Lebanese Christians.

Many Lebanese hoped that the election of a new president would break the political stalemate, yet their hopes were thwarted. President Emile Lahoud left office in November 2007, but the presidential palace in Baabda remained vacant for the next six months. Speaker Nabih Berri insisted that without the political consensus signified by a two-thirds quorum, there would be no election. In Lebanon, the parliament is directly elected by the people, while the president is elected by a majority vote of the parliament. The election was postponed nineteen times, to the frustration of the parliamentary majority. Only after Lebanon tottered on the brink of disaster was army commander General Michel Suleiman, who had long been the consensus choice, elected and sworn into office on May 25, 2008.

Suleiman's candidacy was initially vetoed by the U.S., which viewed him as too close to Syria and to pro-Syrian groups, including Hezbollah. Then, when Suleiman's candidacy was embraced by the government (with U.S. assent) in November, he was nixed by the opposition. In January 2008, new opposition demonstrations led to deadly Sunni-Shi'i clashes south of

Beirut, and four Shi'i demonstrators were killed by the army, evoking Hezbollah recriminations against the army and Suleiman specifically.

The prior month, the army's renowned chief of operations, Brigadier General François al-Hajj, was assassinated en route to the army headquarters in Yarzi, near Beirut. Al-Hajj, who had directed the army's assault at Nahr al-Barid, was a Maronite from the southern village of Rmeish. He was widely expected to replace Suleiman as army commander, and he was known to enjoy excellent relations with Aoun, who described him as "his candidate" to become commander of the army. He maintained good relations with the Shi'i community, but he was also widely respected in Western circles as a consummate professional. The mastermind of the general's assassination remains a mystery, and in addition to the usual suspects—including Syria and revenge-bent Islamists—it is less likely but plausible that other hands, Lebanese ones, were intent to prevent the rise of a nationalist officer as much at ease with opposition as with progovernment forces.

Damascus was the site for the fatal end of another career when on February 12, 2008, a man using the name al-Hajj Radwan died from a car bomb. He was better known as Imad Mughniyah (see [chapter 4](#)), and he earned infamy in his early twenties by playing a key role in the 1983 bombing of the marine barracks in Beirut and by masterminding the snatching and egregious imprisonment of foreign hostages in the 1980s, as well as other horrendous exploits. His funeral in al-dahiya had the feel of a state funeral and was attended by tens of thousands of Lebanese mourners and an official Iranian delegation, including the foreign minister, who heard Nasrallah praise Mughniyah as "the commander of two victories"—Israel's exit in 2000 and the July 2006 war. Nasrallah, who accused Israeli agents of masterminding the attack, also promised revenge against Israel for killing Mughniyah. Most Lebanese were surprised to learn that the notorious Mughniyah was so integral to Hezbollah's battlefield successes, but they were later amply reminded by ubiquitous posters and even an over-the-top opera (*The Scented Light*) that celebrated Mughniyah's exploits and his martyrdom.

If the posthumous outing of Mughniyah was an occasion for adulation in Hezbollah circles, the party's embrace of a renowned terrorist, who was also purported to be an officer in Iran's Revolutionary Guards, underlined

Hezbollah's "otherness" for its many Lebanese detractors. Hezbollah celebrated its links to Iran and promoted resistance to American influence in the Middle East, just as Iran's hardline leaders do. Coupled with credible reports of Hezbollah officials working in league with Iran to train insurgents in Iraq, fear spread that the party's domestic political pretensions were only camouflage to hide its wider regional ambitions.

Hezbollah's domestic adversaries, still seething about the party's devastating provocation of Israel in 2006, justifiably feared—despite repeated pledges to the contrary—that Hezbollah's weapons would be turned against Lebanese, thus precipitating a new civil war. 'Ali Fayyad, the well-known head of Hezbollah's Studies and Documentation Center, emphasized Nasrallah's frequent assurances that Hezbollah's weapons would only be used to defend Lebanon (Fayyad 2006, 9). Nevertheless, in cooperation with some opposition allies, Hezbollah's weapons were used with deadly effect against other Lebanese in May 2008.

In early May 2008, Walid Jumblatt, the mercurial Druze leader, insisted that the government take action against Hezbollah by dismissing the pro-Hezbollah head of security at the airport and investigating an extensive fiber-optic phone network that Hezbollah claimed was integral to its security infrastructure. (It is very unlikely that the cabinet would have acted without significant encouragement, probably from the U.S., but perhaps from Saudi Arabia.) After a long debate, the cabinet agreed and ordered the reassignment of Brigadier General Wafiq Shuqair, a Shi'i from a small village in the South, and directed an investigation of the independent telephone system.

The Hezbollah response was quick in coming. The next day, May 7, demonstrators blocked the roads to the airport with the help of Jihad al-Bina' trucks, which dumped debris to make the route impassable. Hezbollah fighters were joined by unruly Amal and Syrian Social Nationalist Party gunmen and seized control of West Beirut on May 8 and 9. Hezbollah succeeded in coercing the government to rescind the decisions that triggered the crisis, but an immediate casualty was the party's oft-repeated pledge not to turn its weapons against fellow Lebanese. A private militia, funded by Saad al-Din al-Hariri, was brushed aside, and the state's Internal Security Force, which is usually presumed to reflect Sunni interests, simply disappeared. Notably, government buildings were not attacked or occupied.

As the opposition gunmen left their positions to return home in the ensuing days, the army competently assumed security, but only after days of standing aside rather than risk a fracturing of the army.

The Hezbollah-led thrust was a brutal object lesson in power, but it also illustrated the limitations of power. In the Shouf, the region where the Druze predominate, seasoned Hezbollah fighters met their match. Followers of the rival Druze leaders, Talal Arslan and Walid Jumblatt, temporarily put aside their differences to strike blows against Hezbollah. In the far north of Lebanon, in the Akkar town of Halba, Sunni gunmen affiliated with the Future Movement tortured and executed 11 members of the Syrian Social Nationalist opposition party, apparently while the army figuratively held the coats of the assailants. In all, 81 people were killed in a few days of fighting. Very gruesome videos of the violence—particularly of the Halba incident—circulated on the Internet and via cell phones, and within days almost all Lebanese knew of the images, and most had seen the footage.

No feasible mediated solution would avoid returning to a government based on consensus between the major Lebanese players. The United States clung to the politically convenient fiction that a consensus government (with an attendant role for Hezbollah) could be avoided. The realities on the ground in May 2008 forced an adjustment in Washington's thinking. As a result, when the Emir of Qatar offered to mediate between the Lebanese contestants in a hastily organized meeting in Doha, the United States grudgingly supported the effort.

To the relief of most Lebanese, particularly those with a living memory of the fifteen-year civil war that ended only in 1990, an agreement was reached on May 21 in Doha. The next morning at dawn the opposition tents, erected in the heart of Beirut a year and a half before, were removed. The key components included the election by parliament of Michel Suleiman as president, the creation of a consensus government in which the opposition would hold an effective veto, and the crafting of a new election law to govern parliamentary elections, which were conducted in June 2009. After nineteen failed attempts to elect a president beginning in September 2007, General Suleiman was elected and inaugurated on May 25, just in time to save the lucrative summer tourism season.

As is often the case in Lebanon, many of the underlying issues would remain unresolved. Local demands for Hezbollah to disarm would continue

to resonate in Washington, Riyadh, Amman, and Paris, where the group was viewed as a dangerous expression of Iran's regional ambitions. However, the prospects for disarming the Shi'i group were dimmer than ever.

Politics in Lebanon often are a patchwork of competing sectarian and personal interests, joined only by fraying threads of national identity. This was certainly the case in following the Doha agreement, when it took five weeks of horse-trading to assemble a cabinet to be headed by Fouad Siniora, who remained in office until after the 2009 election.

Israel and Hezbollah concluded successful indirect negotiations through German mediators to arrange in July 2008 for the exchange of prisoners and bodies. The exchange returned to Israel the bodies of the two soldiers whose capture two summers before precipitated the thirty-four day war (both soldiers apparently died in captivity of wounds inflicted in the ambush). In return, four Lebanese captured in 2006 were repatriated and Samir Kuntar (see [chapter 6](#)) was freed. Kuntar, a Druze, was despised in Israel because two civilians died at his hands, including a four-year-old girl. One may easily imagine Israelis seething at the spectacle of Kuntar being greeted by the Lebanese government with fanfare and acclaim, as though he were a national hero. Turned out in a brand-new Hezbollah uniform, Kuntar was embraced by Nasrallah, who gloated that the prisoner deal validated the victory of 2006. (Kuntar perished in a Damascus suburb in December 2015, when he and eight other militants were felled by a bomb dropped by the Israeli air force.)

2009 Parliamentary Elections

Within Lebanon, recrimination between Hezbollah and its adversaries accelerated in the run-up to the June 7, 2009, parliamentary elections. Electioneering featured politically significant color-coding. Hezbollah ally General Michel Aoun and his Free Political Movement's characteristically orange signs joined with Hezbollah's yellow posters emphasizing the party's stand against corruption, indebtedness, and deprivation, as well as its stance of resistance. The opposing and predominantly Maronite Lebanese Forces (the chief rival to Michel Aoun's party) produced posters featuring the horizontal red stripes of Lebanese national flag and emphasized that "our national colors will not change." The Future

Movement, the other Hezbollah adversary group led by Saad al-Hariri, son of the assassinated prime minister, offered a variety of symbolic references to the martyred Rafiq al-Hariri. Their bright red posters, proclaiming “I ♥ life,” invited comparison with Hezbollahis and their avowal of martyrdom and death.

The elections, competently organized under the leadership of Interior Minister Ziyad Baroud and observed by election monitors from the Arab League, the European Union, and the Carter Center, proceeded without incident, despite the persistence of vote buying, which remains common in Lebanon. (In and around the Beqaa valley city of Zahle, where the author was on the ground and where seven decisive seats were hotly contested, the going price for a vote was said to be \$200.) The results reflected deep polarization, particularly between Sunni and Shi‘i voters. The Hariri “Future” camp was extraordinarily successful in mobilizing Sunni voters, including Beduin tribespeople along with expatriate voters who were (legally) provided with free plane tickets to allow them to return to vote. I interviewed a family of at least four adults who had been flown all the way from Australia to cast their ballots. Expatriate Lebanese not fortunate enough to trace their roots to competitive electoral districts complained that they were not offered tickets.

It was widely remarked at the time that Saudi Arabia, intent on defeating Hezbollah and checking the power of the Shi‘i community and its Iranian patrons, transferred large sums to finance the campaign of the March 14 alliance.²

When the votes were counted, the March 14 forces carried the day, winning 68 seats as compared to 57 for the Hezbollah-dominated March 8 coalition (three seats were won by independents in the 128-member Chamber of Deputies). In Zahle, heretofore a stronghold for a pro-Syrian politician and his allies, all seven seats, including a single Shi‘i seat, were won by March 14 candidates.

Despite the seemingly decisive electoral victory of the March 14 coalition in these 2009 parliamentary elections, the ensuing four years would be marked by repeated political deadlock. Five months passed before prime ministerdesignate Saad al-Hariri succeeded in assembling his cabinet. His eventual successors, Najib Mikati and Tamam Salam, would face

similar delays due to long bargaining over cabinet composition, as did al-Hariri when he returned as prime minister in December 2016.

Dickering over cabinet portfolios is a familiar feature of all parliamentary systems, but in Lebanon the tough horse-trading stems from intense mutual distrust and rival strategic visions. For Hezbollah's rivals, the bitter memory of the May 2008 Hezbollah-led armed incursion into West Beirut remains fresh. They feared the group and insisted that Hezbollah must disarm. For its part, Hezbollah blocked any effort to impede its military capabilities and pressed for control of two ministries, Interior and Telecommunications.

In a speech on June 8, 2009, the day following the election, the Hezbollah Secretary General Hasan Nasrallah announced that he accepted the results "with sportsmanship and a democratic spirit," but then added that there was a difference between a parliamentary majority and a popular majority. He was alluding to the fact that the cumulative total of votes won by Hezbollah and its allies exceeded by more than 100,000 the votes by the other side (nearly 840,000 votes versus over 690,000).

Nasrallah promised democratic compromise but at the same time signaled obduracy. In addition to the aforementioned attempt to claim two key ministries, Hezbollah and its allies sought to block cabinet action on critical matters, including in particular cooperation with the Netherlands-based Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL), tasked by the United Nations with bringing to trial the accused perpetrators of the killing of Rafiq al-Hariri and twenty-one others who died with him on February 14, 2005. Hezbollah's goal was to attain a "blocking third." (In Lebanon, a coalition government that loses more than one-third of its members is considered to have been toppled.)

The thirty-member cabinet was finally formed in November 2009. Fifteen cabinet seats were accorded to the anti-Hezbollah March 14 coalition, while Hezbollah and its allies held ten. The remaining five seats were occupied by Shi'i Muslims politically aligned with President Michel Suleiman and in tune with political currents in the Shi'i community—i.e., largely (but not always) supportive of Hezbollah. Hezbollah thus easily attained its "blocking third" goal. However, it failed to gain the coveted post of interior minister, which went to much-respected Ziyad Baroud, a

presidential appointee. The Telecommunications Ministry was awarded to economist Charbel Nahas, a supporter of Hezbollah ally Michel Aoun.

A joint ministerial declaration marking the formation of the new government restated the long-standing official position of Lebanon that emphasizes the right of the army and “the resistance” to defend the country and to recover territory that remains occupied by Israel (including Shebaa Farms; see [chapter 4](#)). Five cabinet members from the March 14 coalition dissented from the declaration.

A Change of Tone and a Tweaking of Ideology

On November 30, 2009, Hezbollah released an ideological declaration, the first such document published since 1985. To underline the importance of the new manifesto, Hasan Nasrallah read it via a video link to a live audience in al-dahiya.³ In contrast to the 1985 document, the language in the new paper was subdued in style and in substance and emphasized the Lebanese roots and commitments of the organization: “Lebanon is our homeland and the homeland of our fathers, ancestors. It’s also the homeland of our children, grandchildren, and the coming generations. It is the country to which we have given our most precious sacrifices for its sovereignty and pride, dignity and liberation.” This differs from the 1985 Open Letter, in which the Lebanese political system was dismissed with contempt and Lebanese Christians were told, in no uncertain terms, that they must submit to a life under a system of Islamic law. The 2009 statement decried sectarianism (as many Lebanese often do) and insisted on the importance of a national dialogue, and the reform and improvement of the state. “We want Lebanon for all Lebanese alike, and we want it unified.”

If this manifesto reflected a degree of political maturity and rhetorical restraint, there still remained considerable continuity with the 1985 Open Letter, especially in its strong emphasis on liberating Palestine, its confrontational stance toward the domination of the United States, and its call to combat Israeli expansionism and aggression. In fact, the country most frequently mentioned in the 2009 manifesto is Israel, whereas the Hezbollah patron, Iran, was mentioned only once, as a major Islamic state that provided a model of revolutionary action. If one were to draw only on the evidence of this document, one would never have guessed just how

close the relationship between Iran and Hezbollah had become, or how willing Hezbollah was to jeopardize Lebanese security to preserve these ties.

Worsening Relations with Egypt

Hezbollah gained many admirers across the Arab world following its 2006 war with Israel, and Egypt was no exception. As noted in the previous chapter, Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood applauded the Shi'i group's success, as did many secular professionals. These warm feelings chilled by early 2009. When Israel launched a punitive campaign against the Gaza-based Palestinian Islamist group Hamas in December 2008 and January 2009, Hasan Nasrallah called on the Egyptian people to "take to the streets in the millions." The Egyptian government of the day, not unhappy to see Hamas pummeled, was livid. The Mubarak regime and many Egyptian media commentators close to the regime condemned Hezbollah for trying to foment an uprising. Foreign Minister Ahmad Abu-al-Ghayt depicted Hezbollah as a puppet of Iran. He declared: "Iran and its followers in this region want to turn Egypt into the maid of honor or the page for the crowned Iranian queen when she enters the Middle East. Egypt can never be the maid of honor for anyone because it itself is the crowned lady in this region" (*al-sharq al-awsat*, April 14, 2009).

These remarks were made in April 2009, when Egyptian authorities announced the arrest of twenty-five people, including Muhammad Mansour (also known as Sami Shehab), whom Hasan Nasrallah acknowledged as a member of Hezbollah. Nasrallah revealed that he had dispatched him to Egypt to facilitate the smuggling of weapons to Hamas in Gaza. In 2010, Egypt sentenced Mansour and twenty-one others, including at least one other Hezbollah member (Hassan al-Manakhly), to prison for espionage and illegal possession of weapons. Mansour escaped captivity in 2011 in the chaos of Egypt's "January 25 Revolution" and resurfaced in Lebanon in February 2011.

The Special Tribunal for Lebanon—and Lebanese-Syrian Relations

The STL, authorized by the UN Security Council following the assassination of Rafiq al-Hariri and twenty-one others, began its work in 2009. In the spring of 2009, the German news magazine *Der Spiegel* predicted accurately that members of Hezbollah would likely be indicted for playing a role in the assassination.⁴ According to the article in *Der Spiegel*, the indictment would heavily rely on mobile phone data revealing that members of Hezbollah had coordinated with one another on mobile phones purchased in Tripoli weeks before the attack and that had been used only in conjunction with the assassination (with the exception of a single errant call by a Hezbollahi to his girlfriend, which provided a vital clue). Captain Wissam Eid, a terrorism investigator in the Lebanese Internal Security Force, connected the dots and identified the initial streams of cellular data to establish Hezbollah's complicity. He did not live to see the end of the investigation; on January 25, 2008, he was assassinated by a car bomb, presumably intended to put an end to his investigative efforts.

During this period, when both Hezbollah and its Syrian ally were deeply preoccupied by the activity of the STL, Lebanese prime minister Saad al-Hariri decided that it was in his country's best interest to assuage Syrian apprehensions about STL's investigations while, at the same time, focusing on Hezbollah's role in his father's assassination. (Although it is unlikely that the killing would have gone forward without Syrian assent, if not its complicity, indeed, many Lebanese believe to this day that Syrian President Bashar al-Asad had a controlling hand in the killing of Saad's father.)

In December 2009, Prime Minister al-Hariri made an official visit to Damascus and was hosted by President Bashar al-Asad. Syria had long insisted that its ties with "sisterly" Lebanon were so close that there was no need for usual diplomatic relations, a stance that Lebanese nationalists often took to mean that Syria did not truly acknowledge Lebanon as an independent state. (Only in March 2009 did the "sister states" Syria and Lebanon exchange ambassadors and open embassies in their respective capitals, sixty-five years after each country gained its independence from France.)

Al-Hariri's agenda included pursuing inquiries about the more than six hundred Lebanese who remain missing in Syria after being arrested or seized during the civil war, when Syria was the dominant power in Lebanon, and addressing border disagreements and anomalies. The visit

was not particularly successful in substantive terms, although there were cosmetic improvements in bilateral relations. Most important, the meeting signaled that Syria was not being held culpable for the killing of al-Hariri's father, a striking accomplishment for Bashar al-Asad. The extent of al-Asad's victory became even more evident in an extraordinary interview given by Saad al-Hariri to the Londonbased *al-Sharq al-Awsat* on September 5, 2010:

I have opened a new page in relations with Syria since the formation of the government.... One must be realistic in this relationship and build it on solid foundations. One should also assess the past years, so as not to repeat previous mistakes. Hence, we conducted an assessment of errors committed on our behalf with Syria, [and] I felt for the Syrian people, and the relationship between the two countries. We must always look to the interests of both peoples, both countries and their relationship. At a certain stage we made mistakes. We accused Syria of assassinating the martyred premier, and this was a political accusation.

He then promised that the tribunal would only look at evidence, not pursue political agendas as, it might be added, Hezbollah and its allies accused the March 14 movement of doing.

However, these assurances did not mitigate Hezbollah's concerns. Despite backing down where Syria was concerned, Prime Minister al-Hariri continued to insist on a weapons-free Beirut, where only the army and police would be armed, and he refused to disavow the STL, as Hezbollah had insisted he do. Hezbollah officials, including Hasan Nasrallah in widely publicized speeches, made accusations of Israeli complicity in the 2005 assassination, noting evidence of Israeli surveillance on February 14, 2005, while pointing to about seventy Israeli spies who had been unearthed in Lebanon since 2008, including forty who were in custody by the end of 2010. Al-Hariri and his cabinet allies insisted on sticking with the STL.

During a visit to Washington, D.C., in January 2011, the Lebanese prime minister was hardly out of the White House Oval Office after a meeting with President Barack Obama when he learned that his government had fallen. On January 12, all ten Hezbollah-aligned members resigned and

were joined by one of the five Shi'i cabinet members appointed by President Suleiman.

In the Lebanese parliament, the Druze bloc (representing about 7 percent of the Lebanese population), accompanied by a couple of Armenian deputies, also shifted sides and broke with al-Hariri's government. Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, known among his people by the honorific "Walid Baik," has always enjoyed a well-earned reputation for anticipating changes in political currents and shifting position accordingly.

These developments set the stage in late January 2011 for a Lebanese parliamentary vote for leadership of the new government. The major political beneficiary of the new administration was General Michel Aoun and his Free Patriotic Movement, which secured seven seats for itself in a cabinet completely dominated by Hezbollah-affiliated March 8 elements. Najib Mikati, a wealthy businessman from Tripoli who headed a brief caretaker government following the 2005 assassination of Rafiq al-Hariri, defeated the incumbent Saad al-Hariri for the post of prime minister by a vote of 68–60. Mikati has a reputation for being close to Syria, but, like most Sunni politicians in contemporary Lebanon, he strives to stay on good terms with Saudi Arabia. Mikati is commonly described as an accomplice of Hezbollah, but after assuming the prime ministry, he thwarted Hezbollah on several key issues, most notably the payment of Lebanon's contribution for the funding of the STL.

In November 2011, despite intense pressure from Hezbollah to drop support for the tribunal, Mikati arranged for the payment of the full Lebanese contribution of \$34 million (€24 million) without seeking government approval. Western powers, including the United States and France, left little doubt of the dire consequences should Lebanon fail to support the STL. Equally important, non-payment would have thrown Lebanon into chaos. Mikati avoided having to address the issue at the cabinet level by drawing on an account independently controlled by the prime minister's office. By doing so, he was able to keep the peace with Hezbollah while placating the country's Western allies. In the end, Hezbollah head Nasrallah and his colleagues were not willing to face the consequences of the turmoil that would have ensued if its demands for defunding the STL had been met.

The first half of 2011 saw plenty of turmoil in Lebanon, as the Syrian civil war increasingly spilled across Lebanese borders. Evidence of Hezbollah's growing role in the Syria fighting became irrefutable, as the Hezbollahi casualty numbers mounted. Criticism, not to mention ridicule of Hezbollah's hypocrisy, mounted. On March 19, 2011, when the "Arab Spring" was still in its early days, Nasrallah made a speech applauding the inherent authenticity and justice of the Arab Spring: "These popular revolutions are real. They came from the people and the political parties followed. They express awareness, enthusiasm and willingness to sacrifice. This should not be forgotten by the regimes that are facing these peoples." Yet, in addressing Syria, he adopted a different perspective by extolling the wise leadership of Bashar al-Asad and commending his reform agenda. Meanwhile, fears of violence grew in Lebanon. Deadly Sunni-Alawi clashes in Tripoli punctuated 2012, and anti-Hezbollah demonstrations led by the Salafi Shaikh Ahmad al-Assir grew increasingly militant. Along the Lebanese-Syrian border, Lebanese Sunnis intent on joining the fighting in Syria were sometimes interdicted by the Lebanese army. In May 2012, Shaikh Ahmad 'Abd al-Wahid, a leading Lebanese Sunni adversary of the Ba'thist regime in Syria, was killed at an army checkpoint in the 'Akkar when he and his driver allegedly refused to stop.

The country was already a tangle of exposed nerves when Major General Wissam al-Hassan was assassinated by a planted car bomb in October 2012. The general was close to Saad al-Hariri and headed the intelligence bureau of the Internal Security Forces. Al-Hassan was cooperating closely with the STL, and it was one his officers, the late Captain Wissam Eid, who had discovered the electronic evidence that was integral to the STL's investigation.

Two months prior to al-Hassan's death, in August 2012, Michel Samaha, a former information minister who was famously close to the Syrian regime, was arrested after being caught red-handed on surveillance video and audio recordings accepting a \$170,000 payment to direct bombings against opponents of Syria in Lebanon's northern 'Akkar province. The physical evidence included twenty-four explosive devices found in the trunk of his car. The head of Lebanon's Internal Security Forces (ISF), Major General Ashraf Rifi describes the case as "airtight." Much speculation arose about the reasons for al-Hassan's assassination,

including the possibility that it was in retaliation for Samaha's arrest. The jailed minister faced a possible death sentence if convicted. Despite the "airtight" evidence, the outcome of the trial was hardly assured. Bashar al-Asad's fortunes and the outcome of the civil war in Syria were widely expected to influence Samaha's fate. Nonetheless, in April 2016, Samaha was sentenced to 13 years imprisonment, and he is confined in Lebanon's Rihaniyah military prison.

Mikati's tenure as prime minister continued to be driven by the "security portfolio." In March 2013, he pushed for the extension in office of ISF head Ashraf Rifi, despite Rifi's having reached the mandatory retirement age of fifty-nine. Among Lebanon's three major security institutions—the army, General Security (*al-amn al-'amm*), and the ISF (*quwa al-amn al-dakhali*)—the ISF has been most resistant to the influence of March 8 elements, including Hezbollah. Mikati also sought to extend his term, in conjunction with an extension of the term in office for General Jean Kahwaji, the commander of the Lebanese armed forces. He failed for two reasons: first, and most obviously, Hezbollah and its allies wished to put in place an ally in the ISF; second, Michel Aoun was not anxious to see the army chief's term extended because he was pushing for his own candidate, Brigadier General Shamel Roukoz, to be given the job. Roukoz just happens to be Aoun's son-in-law, as well as the commander of the esteemed Commando Regiment (*fawj al-mughawir*).⁵ In Lebanon, the sweetest plums are shared with family.

As a result, Prime Minister Mikati resigned in March 2013, but continued to serve as a caretaker for months while his successor attempted to assemble a government. His designated successor, Tamam Salam, is a familiar Beirut figure, and his father, Saeb Salam, frequently served as prime minister in Lebanon's pre-civil war years. Tamam Salam has been sometimes described as aligned with March 14, but that is arguable. He has walked a careful path sustaining cordial relations with Syria and respectful ties to Saudi Arabia, and he is the consummate diplomat who calibrates his political stances with the deftness of a tightrope walker. He was approved nearly unanimously by the parliament (124–4), yet his government was not in place until February 2014.

With only a caretaker government in place in July 2013, and little prospect for agreement on a new military commander, the term in office of

General Kahwaji was extended for two years by Defense Minister Fayez Ghosn, an assertion of dubious authority that was promptly challenged by Michel Aoun.

Parliamentary elections should have been held in June 2013, but were postponed repeatedly and were not conducted until May 2018. Contestation over the electoral law, particularly the drawing of electoral districts, was a significant reason for delay. This is a common occurrence and one that typically is driven by gerrymandering that would be familiar to any student of U.S. politics. Hezbollah, and the Shi'i community in general, tend to prefer a proportional representation formula for elections, which would benefit the large Shi'i community. Many non-Shi'i politicians prefer smaller districts and majoritarian criteria. After much wrangling, the parliament passed a new electoral law in June 2017. The law provides for a proportional electoral system, which may allow independent and smaller party candidates the chance to win a few seats, as well as redrawn electoral districts, which will ensure that Christian candidates will be elected by a majority of Christian voters unlike the situation in 2009 when Muslim voters often accounted for a majority of votes in districts electing Christian candidates.

President Michel Suleiman's six-year term of office came to an end in May 2014. According to the Lebanese Constitution the president is limited to a single six-year term, but, under pressure from then-dominant Syria, the Chamber of Deputies nevertheless extended the incumbencies of both the previous two presidents (Elias Hrawi and Emile Lahoud) for three years. Early in his term of office, President Suleiman was often viewed by Hezbollah's adversaries in Lebanon as a steady partner of the Shi'i group, but he became increasingly critical of Hezbollah's heavy involvement in the Syrian fighting. His periodic calls for Hezbollah's disengagement from Syria grew increasingly pointed when he suggested a reexamination of national security policy since, in his view, the primary mission of the Resistance is to defend Lebanon from Israel, not to fight in Syria.⁶ Hezbollah therefore was happy to see Suleiman's term expire, and a deadlock ensued in parliament over who would fill the post. It would require two and a half years for the impasse to end. On October 31, 2016, General Michel Aoun, leader of the Free Patriotic Movement and Hezbollah ally, won the presidency.

In the interim after the expiration of Suleiman's term and before Aoun won the presidency, signs of political discontent were clear at the popular level. In the summer of 2015, the government failed to reach an agreement on the disposal of trash. Since 1997, a site near Na'ama (south of Beirut) was the main location used for trash disposal, and the dump was filled to overflowing. A series of protests led to the closure of the dump in July 2015, without an agreed alternative site. As a result, trash began to pile up around the country. Provoked to action by odiferous mounds of trash, a civil society movement emerged, calling itself "You Stink." Despite government attempts to harass, suppress and attack You Stink, the movement captured a lot of public support in Beirut. Under government direction, piles of garbage collected in empty fields and under bridges, while the basic issue remained unsolved, namely agreeing on a long-term solution that did not pose a threat to public health. It was not until the spring of 2016 that trash disposal arrangements were in place. While You Stink lost momentum later in 2015, the movement's effort provided a model for action.

In recent decades, municipal elections have been held in Lebanon every six years. The elections are important for a variety of reasons: the elected councils govern on a local level, including providing many government services, collecting taxes, and allocating funds. The local elections provide an opportunity for people to enter politics at a level that makes a difference in everyday life. Also, and in contrast to national politics, offices are not allocated on a sectarian basis.

In a country where public opinion polling is not widely conducted, municipal elections often provide a barometer of local sentiments. The 2016 elections revealed a significant level of discontent at the grassroots level. In a number of municipalities, the established political elites, whether Christian or Muslim, found themselves challenged by relative outsiders. Hezbollah and Amal, the Shi'i organizations, had to scuffle to suppress competitors. The deck is stacked in the municipal elections because there is no provision for the proportional allocation of seats. Typically, the winning candidates are members of lists assembled by a coalition of parties, local elites or families, so it is not simply a matter of finding an attractive candidate as much as pulling together a winning alliance. Nonetheless, outsider candidates did manage to win some signal victories, as in Tripoli, where Saad al-Hariri entered a compact with a number of local elites, only

to see 18 out of 24 council seats won by an opposition list. If the elites managed to surpass their challengers in many instances, the 2016 election underlined a serious level of discontent with those in power.⁷

Widening Rifts within Lebanon

Within Lebanon itself, Sunni-Shi'i mistrust has intensified for several reasons. Leading the list is the alleged complicity of Hezbollah in the assassination of former prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri. As noted above, accusations of Hezbollah's complicity in the killing began in 2009 with the exposé in the German newsweekly *Der Spiegel*. The Special Tribunal for Lebanon formally indicted five Hezbollah members for their role in the assassination. One of the accused was Mustafa Amin Badr al-Din, a notorious Hezbollah official who was reportedly killed by shellfire near the Damascus airport in May 2016. The other accused remain at large, and Hezbollah has vowed that the STL will never be allowed to apprehend them.⁸ While Hezbollah's campaign to discredit the STL still resonates with its core supporters, the party's opponents see it as proof of the organization's culpability—even as they dread the disorder that a trial and guilty verdict would bring. The four accused Hezbollahis are being tried in absentia at a location not far from the tribunal headquarters in the Hague, Netherlands. After commencing in 2014 and dealing with related cases in 2015 and 2016, the trial reconvened in August 2017.

Recent memories of the 2006 war with Israel also remain a source of mutual embitterment. Hezbollah's opponents continue to hold it responsible for provoking the war and for the attendant destruction. They fear that Hezbollah will ignite new military conflicts in the South in retaliation for a possible U.S. and/or Israeli attack on Iranian nuclear facilities, or simply in order to reinforce its reputation as the symbol of "resistance" in the region. For Hezbollah's part, its leaders have long suspected that during the 2006 conflict its Lebanese rivals surreptitiously encouraged Israel in its campaign to destroy Hezbollah's military capacity. Classified U.S. diplomatic cables released by WikiLeaks in 2011 lend veracity to the accusation. One such cable recounted a wartime meeting between U.S. ambassador Jeffrey Feltman, U.N. envoy Terje Larsen, and several Lebanese political leaders. Among the Lebanese present was the wily Walid Jumblatt, the Druze leader

and then an ally of the anti-Hezbollah March 14 coalition. The cable paraphrases Jumblatt: “Although March 14 must call for a cease-fire in public, it is hoping that Israel continues its military operations until it destroys Hezbollah’s military capabilities.”⁹ These irrefutable WikiLeaks transcripts of anti-Hezbollah comments in discussions between Western diplomats and leading political figures, including then prime minister Fouad Siniora, inflamed Lebanon’s Shi’a community.

Hezbollah’s public image within Lebanon has also taken a beating from self-inflicted wounds. Unfortunately for a party that has cultivated a reputation of being untainted by corruption, a 2009 financial scandal struck at the core of the organization and affected a number of Shi’i investors, particularly prosperous emigrants who retain strong ties to southern Lebanon. Salah Izz al-Din, a “son of the South” with close ties to the party, was charged with fraud for bilking investors, including close advisors to Nasrallah, out of as much as a billion dollars. Described as a “Lebanese Bernie Madoff,” he benefited from close ties to influential figures and the glow of legitimacy gained by generous donations to local institutions. His pyramid scheme offered outsize returns from investments in minerals and other natural resources. The scandal was a source of enormous embarrassment to the party. While there have been other charges of corruption against Hezbollah, this case unleashed unprecedented anger and public debate.

There is little question that Hezbollah, along with its former rival and present ally Amal, still dominates the politics of the Lebanese Shi’i community. At the popular level, however, support is tenuous. Resentment of Iran’s often heavy hand in Lebanon is strongly felt within Amal, and across the Shi’i community fears of broadened conflict, stemming either from Syria or from a new war with Israel, are common. Pious Shi’i youths who respect the sacrifices of their parents to liberate Lebanon from occupation and to end the deprivation and marginality of the Shi’a are not necessarily ready to emulate them.¹⁰ This waning of zeal is a matter of concern for Hezbollah’s leaders.

In some regions, especially in the Beqaa valley in the vicinity of Baalbek and Hermil, tribes (‘*ashira*, plural: ‘*asha’ir*) remain strong. Despite their support for Hezbollah, the tribes remain fiercely autonomous from both the party and the Lebanese government. Tribes are large extended

families, often organized through government-chartered family associations, and they must be treated with deference. This was illustrated in August 2013 when the al-Miqdad clan, with roots in Baalbek but also a strong presence in the *dahiya*, kidnapped more than forty people, including members of the Free Syrian Army, in retaliation for the capture of a Miqdad in Syria. The captives were later freed by the Lebanese army (reportedly with help from Hezbollah), but the episode illustrates the limits of Hezbollah's influence and control, especially at a time when challenges are coming from many different directions.¹¹

A number of Hezbollah's critics have become increasingly vocal, particularly as the party became an active combatant in Syria. Former secretary general Subhi Tufayli often accuses Hezbollah of being an instrument of Iranian ambition and argues that Hezbollahis who die in Syria are not martyrs but victims of a party that is supporting the wrong side in Syria. Tufayli retains a respectable following in the northern Beqaa valley, which he has long accused both the government and Hezbollah of neglecting. Similarly critical are Shaykhs Hani Fahs (until his death in 2014) and Ali al-Amin; Ahmad al-As'ad, scion of a famous *za'im*; and Ibrahim Shams al-Din, son of the late Ayatollah Muhammad Mahdi Shams al-Din. The legacy of Shams al-Din is important, since the late ayatollah was known for his advocacy of intersectarian tolerance and dialogue, as well as for his commitment to reform and integration within the context of shari'a. He was a formidable critic of Iran's agenda in Lebanon and was often a thorn in the side of Hezbollah.

Another ayatollah who inspired enormous respect in Arab Shi'i communities, Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah, died in July 2010. Unlike Hezbollah, he rejected the Iranian model of a supreme clerical authority (*wilayat al-faqih*), and he offered a rational, modern, and often scientific approach to piety that appealed to his following, especially younger, educated Shi'a in Lebanon and well beyond. The esteem in which Fadlallah's memory is held remains worrisome to Hezbollah's leadership precisely because he directly challenged the centrality of Iran to contemporary Shi'ism.

Since the death of Ayatollah Fadlallah, his son, Sayyid 'Ali Fadlallah, has assumed leadership of the ayatollah's widespread institutional legacy: an array of schools, charities, and service agencies that rival the Hezbollah-

dominated infrastructure. Based in Beirut, Sayyid ‘Ali now occupies his late father’s offices in al-dahiya. Like his late father, he has emphasized diversity within Shi‘ism, rejected the idea that Iran should play a privileged leadership role for the Shi‘a, and has spoken out against the oppressive al-Asad regime in Damascus.

In June 2013, followers of Shaikh Ahmad al-Assir, a longtime critic of Hezbollah, clashed with Hezbollah supporters near the Abra district in Saida, which is less than 30 miles south of Beirut. The clashes included an ultimatum that supporters of Hezbollah vacate their apartments. The army attempted to quell the fighting but suffered eighteen deaths at the hands of the shaikh’s followers, which prompted intervention by army commandos and elements linked with Hezbollah. The army eventually established control, but the shaikh and many of his followers escaped.¹² A reliable Lebanese observer and lifetime resident of Saida noted that he and others were happy to see the firebrand cleric vanquished, but he also complained about the behavior of the Hezbollah forces, including the looting of valuables from the apartments of innocent bystanders to the clashes. This is a striking detail because Hezbollah has taken great pains to preserve the image of their forces as being highly disciplined and not corruptible. In reaction to the incident, several Salafist shaikhs in Tripoli called for a jihad against Hezbollah and the Lebanese army, an indication that the subversion of public order within Lebanon will continue.

International Ostracism of Hezbollah

After years of resisting U.S. and Israeli efforts to stigmatize Hezbollah as a terrorist group, the European Union (EU) compromised in July 2013 by declaring Hezbollah’s “military wing” to be a terrorist organization. A majority of EU members have long held that Hezbollah is a legitimate political party in Lebanon, but several events have contributed to a rethinking of that presumption. In July 2012, a suicide bomber attacked a bus carrying Israeli tourists in Burgas, Bulgaria, resulting in the deaths of five Israeli passengers and the Bulgarian bus driver. The Bulgarian government linked two conspirators with dual citizenship (Australian-Lebanese and Canadian-Lebanese) to Hezbollah, and gathered (or was provided with) additional evidence implicating Hezbollah in the attack.

Other anti-Israel plots linked to Hezbollah (presumably, in retaliation for the Israeli assassination of Imad Mughniyya in 2008) have been thwarted or discovered in India, Thailand, Azerbaijan, and Africa. The Burgas attack was, however, the first of its kind on European soil. Just a few months before the EU designation, in March 2013, a Lebanese man was convicted in Cyprus of conducting surveillance of Israeli flights at Larnaca Airport. Further impetus for the EU's action was provided by Hezbollah's decisive armed intervention in al-Qusayr, Syria, in April 2013.

As a practical matter, it is not at all clear how the EU will implement its decision. Hezbollah does not reveal the identities of militia cadre, and its military wing depends heavily on a system of volunteer reservists who move fluidly between military and civilian life. The influential leader of Hezbollah's parliamentary delegation, Muhammad Ra'ad, cynically noted, "The Hezbollah military wing is a lie invented by the Europeans because they feel the need to communicate with us and they want to make a delusional separation between the so-called military and political wings."¹³ In anticipation of the EU decision, Hasan Nasrallah dismissively suggested that the EU dip the paper in water and drink the ink.¹⁴

Nasrallah was being cavalier, however. The EU designation further erodes Hezbollah's credibility in the Arab world and encourages its regional adversaries, particularly the Arab Gulf states, to continue steps to isolate and weaken the organization. Following the al-Qusayr intervention, the six Arab states comprising the Gulf Cooperation Council declared an economic and political boycott of Hezbollah, and individual members, especially the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, expelled scores of alleged supporters of Hezbollah.

With Iran's economy and currency in decline under the pressure from U.S.- and UN-mandated economic sanctions, the ability of the Islamic Republic to sustain its large subsidies to Hezbollah and the range of institutions that it superintends is in question. Steps such as those taken by the EU and the Gulf Cooperation Council, as well as sanctions imposed by the U.S. on Hezbollah financiers and officials, threaten to further reduce the flow of funds to Hezbollah at a time when the organization is stretched thin. In December 2015, the U.S. Congress passed the "Hizballah International Financing Prevention Act" in an attempt to further tighten the financial noose. The law, aggressively policed by the U.S. Department of Treasury,

imposes sanctions on any non-U.S. financial entity that “knowingly facilitates a significant transaction or transactions for Hezbollah.” Fearing sanctions, many Lebanese banks closed numerous accounts linked to Hezbollah, as well as many other accounts that were not expressly within the orbit of the law. One side effect was considerable tension between Hezbollah and the banking sector, including with the august Central Bank. In June 2016, one bank was bombed, presumably by Hezbollah, in apparent retaliation for its effort to strictly comply with the law.

Sunni-Shi‘i Tensions

The respect Hezbollah gained in the Arab world for its ability to go toe-to-toe with Israel in 2006 has since been supplanted by animosity and suspicion. Except within Shi‘i communities, the luster of Secretary General Hasan Nasrallah’s reputation has been badly tarnished.

The shift reflects transnational factors, including waves of populism and rising sectarianism unleashed by the Arab awakenings that began in late 2010, which played out against a decade of geopolitical jousting between leading Arab states and Iran. The 2003 invasion of Iraq, which hugely benefited Iran and which made possible the rise to power of the Iraqi Shi‘i majority, exacerbated sectarian tensions and prompted an us-versus-them mentality in a variety of predominantly Sunni Arab states, including Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and the smaller Arab states of the Gulf. Local detail or nuance has been ignored in favor of a simple-minded focus on an alleged Shi‘i threat said to be orchestrated by Iran. This is certainly true in Lebanon, where the Sunni community points to Hezbollah as an extension of Iran’s quest for hegemony.

Polling in the region conducted in late 2012 confirms both a polarization between Arab Sunnis and Shi‘a and a plummeting of support for Iran among Sunni Arabs.¹⁵ Whereas Iran enjoyed favorability ratings of over 70 percent in Jordan and Morocco and over 90 percent in Egypt in 2006, six years later the numbers had fallen to between 20 and 30 percent. When former Iranian President Ahmedinejad visited Cairo in February 2013, shoes were thrown at him, an indignity previously reserved for U.S. President George W. Bush, who had dodged shoe leather five years earlier

in Baghdad. The Cairo shoe-throwing protester was angered by Iran's support for the Ba'athist regime in Damascus.

The apparently fraudulent Iranian elections in 2009 exposed Iran to close scrutiny when it clamped down harshly on demonstrators protesting the re-election of President Ahmedinejad. This played poorly in Arab media across the region. Saudi Arabia has contributed mightily to the deepening sectarian divide by underwriting anti-Shi'i diatribes in the many print and electronic media outlets that it controls or influences. Riyadh's formula has been to denounce groups that it opposes—especially Hezbollah and other Shi'i groups or communities, such as Yemen's Houthi movement and Bahrain's Shi'i majority—as agents of Iranian influence.

Even where the evidence for Iranian meddling is flimsy, notably in Bahrain, Saudi officials are undeterred. Charges from the Bahraini and Saudi governments that Iran was behind the demonstrations that began in 2011, were countered by U.S. officials who pointedly noted that the charges were not supported by evidence. In fact the majority Shi'i population in Bahrain has long been moderate, and surprisingly so given the systematic discrimination that routinely confronts the Baharna, as the Shi'a are called. The risk is that the Bahraini Shi'a will be radicalized, and that charges of foreign meddling by Iran will prove to be self-fulfilling.

More important, Iran's potent and substantial support for the Ba'athist regime in Syria, a longtime ally, has been widely disparaged in Arab ruling circles. Iran's unfettered flights through Iraqi airspace to deliver armaments to Syria have only served to validate suspicions about the Shi'i-dominated government in Baghdad and its friendly relations with Iran. On the ground in Syria, Iran and Hezbollah, as well as other aligned militias, have decisively intervened to keep the regime in power and to thwart rebel forces and their regional and international supporters, as the next chapter reveals.

¹ This trend is compellingly described by the French scholar Bernard Rougier in his book *Everyday Jihad* (Harvard University Press, 2007).

² The March 14 alliance took its name from the date in 2005, one month after the assassination of Rafiq al-Hariri, when a coalition of political groups and individuals mounted a massive demonstration in Beirut to mark the assassination, demanded that the assassins be brought to justice, and called for an end to Syrian domination of Lebanon. The leading elements in the alliance included Saad al-Hariri's Future Movement and a variety of Christian groups, of which the largest was Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement. Aoun later broke with the March 14 alliance and aligned with Hezbollah and the March 8 coalition. The March 8 coalition, for its part, takes its name from a very

large and rival demonstration in 2005 composed of members of pro-Syrian groups who assembled to thank Syria for its role in Lebanon. In addition to Hezbollah and Amal, several predominantly Christian parties participated (see [chapter 6](#) for more details).

³ In Arabic, the document was called a *wathiqa siyasiyya* (political paper), but Hezbollah officials have styled it a “manifesto.” An English translation may be found at <http://www.lebanonrenaissance.org/assets/Uploads/15-The-New-Hezbollah-Manifesto-Nov09.pdf>.

⁴ Eric Follath, “New Evidence Points to Hezbollah in Hariri Murder,” *Der Spiegel*, May 23, 2009, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/breakthrough-in-tribunal-investigation-new-evidence-points-to-hezbollah-in-hariri-murder-a-626412.html>.

⁵ The Commando Brigade was previously commanded by François al-Hajj, who was also close to Aoun and was assassinated in 2007 (see above).

⁶ Suleiman’s remarks were made in an Army Day speech on August 1, 2013.

⁷ The best single article on the 2016 elections is Ziad Abu-Rish, “Municipal Politics in Lebanon,” *Middle East Report*, Fall 2016, 46(3): 4–11.

⁸ The four accused men are Salim Jamil Ayyash, Hassan Habib Merhi, Hussein Hassan Oneissi and Assad Hassan Sabra. Badr was the brother-in-law of the late Imad Mughniyah (see above). Badr al-Din is thought to have replaced Mughniyah as the head of the External Operations Branch of Hezbollah, which is believed to have been responsible for a variety of terrorist attacks. The STL indictment may be downloaded at: <https://www.stl-tsl.org/en/the-cases/stl-11-01>.

⁹ The meeting took place on July 16, 2006. See <http://wikileaks.org/cable/2006/07/06BEIRUT2403.html>.

¹⁰ See the excellent ethnography by Lara Deeb and Mona Harb, *Leisurely Islam: Negotiating Geography and Morality in Shi’ite South Beirut* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

¹¹ See the informative analysis by Lara Deeb and Mona Harb, “Fissures in Hizballah’s Edifice of Control,” *Middle East Report*, October 30, 2012, <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero103012>.

¹² Shaikh al-Assir was finally captured in 2016, when he tried to escape via the Beirut airport. In September 2017, Lebanon’s military court sentenced him to death for his role in the death of the soldiers.

¹³ *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, July 30, 2013.

¹⁴ From remarks on May 25, 2013, marking the liberation of Lebanon in 2000, and broadcast on al-Manar.

¹⁵ John Zogby, *Looking at Iran* (Washington, D.C., Zogby Research Services, 2013), and for a summary of the survey see <http://www.aaiusa.org/poll-irans-favorable-ratings-among-arabs-muslims-plummet>.

Chapter 8

Hezbollah's Syrian Entanglement

In December 2010, widespread protests erupted in Tunisia prompted by economic despair, government corruption, and widespread contempt for President Zine el-‘Abidine Ben ‘Ali. By mid-January 2011, Ben ‘Ali had fled to Saudi Arabia and a remarkably strong series of uprisings (then styled the “Arab Spring”) began across much of the Arab world, including in Egypt, where, in February 2011, President Hosni Mubarak was toppled after nearly three decades in power. In Bahrain, Libya, and Yemen, significant uprisings erupted. With the exception of Tunisia, many of the hopes unleashed in 2011 were thwarted and initial accomplishments were reversed and crushed. Egypt is today a harsher dictatorship than it was under Mubarak, the majority of Bahrainis live in a police state, and Libya is a fractured, contested, and largely dysfunctional state. Yemen is wracked by a civil war as well as by the violent intervention and often indiscriminate bombing and shelling by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in support of the ineffectual but nominally legitimate government, which was forced to flee Sana‘a, the capital. Iran offers opportunistic material support for the rebel coalition in Yemen, and by doing so provides a rationale for the Saudis and Emiratis to continue their campaign.



Hezbollah members carrying the coffin of Mustafa Badr al-Din, who was killed near Damascus in May 2016. The photograph was taken by Aziz Taher. Copyright © Reuters 2016.

In a famous interview with *The Wall Street Journal* (January 31, 2011), Syrian President Bashar al-Asad bragged that Syria, in contrast to Egypt, was stable because of his government's reform program and because of the ideology that defined the political ethos in his country. At the time of the interview, his counterpart in Tunisia had already fled and Mubarak would be pushed from power within two weeks. Al-Asad's self-satisfaction was misplaced. By mid-March, peaceful demonstrations, the most important of which were sparked by the savage treatment of children who had posted anti-government graffiti, began in Syria. Syrian forces responded to demonstrators with deadly fire. By July 2011, armed insurgent groups emerged, including the Free Syrian Army, which was largely manned by military veterans and soldiers who deserted from the Syrian armed forces.



MAP 3 Syria: Administrative Divisions. Syria has fourteen provinces.

Even before the United Nations proclaimed in June 2012 that a civil war was under way in Syria, the pattern of indiscriminate violence and the breakdown of central governmental authority in many parts of the country were well under way. Former United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan attempted to mediate a halt in the conflict and announced a ceasefire in mid-April 2012, along with a six-point peace plan to which the government agreed. The effort collapsed from repeated violations, especially by the Syrian security forces, as well as opposition groups. Just a month later, in May, 78 people, including noncombatant men and women and about four dozen children, were summarily slaughtered in the vicinity

of Homs by a government aligned militia, the Shabiha. The victimization of civilians would become a regular occurrence, especially at the hands of government forces and allies.

In June, Annan succeeded in convening a meeting (usually referred to as “Geneva I”) between the U.S., Russia, Britain, and China. The participants agreed on the need for a Syrian transitional authority, but Russia and the U.S. disagreed on whether Bashar al-Asad would have a role in the authority. Annan resigned from the joint UN–Arab League effort in August. Concurrent with Annan’s effort, an Arab League monitoring group and a UN observer mission deployed. Both entities failed to stem the violence. Lakhdar Brahimi, a highly respected Algerian diplomat and former minister of foreign affairs, was appointed by the United Nations with the support of the Arab League to succeed Annan. Brahimi’s efforts, including an October 2012 ceasefire, failed to take hold, but he continued the pursuit of a diplomatic conclusion to the civil war, including the convening of an international conference (referred to as “Geneva II”) in Montreux, Switzerland, in January and February 2014, which yielded no significant results. Syrian government negotiators refused to put any compromises on the table, whereas the opposition participants insisted that the government hand power to a still-to-be-created transitional authority. At this juncture neither side was strong enough to impose terms, nor weak enough to swallow defeat.

Many in neighboring Lebanon watched the cataclysms of violence and savagery in dismay and with an active memory of the 15-year civil war that wracked Lebanon until 1990. At the political level efforts to avoid entanglement in the Syrian events were under way. On June 11, 2012, the National Committee of Dialogue, under the chairmanship of President Michel Suleiman, issued the Baabda Declaration, which was an attempt to revive the flagging dialogue of rivals that began in March 2006. The declaration promotes Lebanese neutrality in regional conflicts, supports UN Security Council resolutions calling for the disarming of militias, and, with specific reference to Syria, states that Lebanon “cannot be used as a base, corridor or starting point to smuggle weapons and combatants.” This position is often referred to as a policy of “disassociation” from the Syrian civil war.

But Lebanon is deeply entangled with Syria. The sectarian parameters of the civil war in Syria have provided a fertile space for confessional recruitment, for instance in the northern and predominantly Sunni city of Tripoli, where the Free Syrian Army opposing Bashar al-Asad has found a strong base of support. Tripoli has been the site of many deadly clashes between the resident 'Alawi community (which aligns with brethren in Syria in support of the 'Alawi-dominated regime) and the adjacent Sunni urban quarter. The city has become the epicenter for militant Salafism, and Hezbollah's involvement in northern Lebanon has spurred Sunni recruitment.¹

Floods of refugees have crossed the easily infiltrated northern and eastern border that Lebanon shares with Syria. By mid-2017, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees placed the total number of registered refugees in Lebanon at more than one million, while credible estimates indicate that at least another half million refugees have eluded registration. In a country of four and half million citizens, the number of refugees is extraordinary. Many of the Syrians who have fled to Lebanon have found sanctuary with extended family members or have depended on the amenability and generosity of Lebanese villagers. The Lebanese government has opposed the establishment of formal refugee camps that would likely become autonomous bases for the Syrian opposition forces or permanent entities, as happened in the case of Palestinian refugee camps. Allies of the Syrian regime, notably Hezbollah, have deployed forces in the north to attempt to interdict the flow of arms and fighters across the border, with limited success.

The stakes for Hezbollah in Syria are not hard to fathom. Syria has offered the resistance strategic depth and a conduit for arms shipments. Particularly since the elevation of Bashar al-Asad to the Syrian presidency in 2000, a close working relationship developed between Nasrallah and the president. Moreover, Hezbollah was enormously popular in Syria for its role in ending the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon in 2000 and for its conduct of the 2006 war. The days of widespread reverence for Hezbollah ended in Syria as it became progressively entangled in the civil war.

The first significant deployment of Hezbollah fighters to Syria, in the summer of 2012, was south of Damascus to protect a revered religious site: the mosque and mausoleum of Sayyida Sitt Zainab, the revered daughter of

Imam ‘Ali. Since the 1970s the area has enjoyed growing pious tourism by Shi‘a. Sitt Zainab, as the area is called, is the site of religious schools (*hawzas*) established by Hasan al-Shirazi, Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah, ‘Ali Khamenei, and others, as well as a focal point for Iraqi Shi‘i refugees fleeing the rampages of violence that followed the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. Not unexpectedly, hundreds of Shi‘i volunteers converged in 2011 on Sitt Zainab to aid in its defense, many of them comprising the multinational al-‘Abbas Brigade. Iran’s Revolutionary Guard has reportedly played a role in arming the al-‘Abbas force, which contains recruits from Lebanon, Iran, Iraq, the small Syrian Shi‘i community, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. A Hezbollah contingent has been active in Sitt Zainab for years, and it was expanded following a June 2012 car bombing that damaged the shrine.

After the June 2012 bombing, Hezbollahi militiamen have deployed widely in Syria, often in coordination with the Iranian Quds Force. Initially, Hezbollah’s involvement was limited to the offering of technical advice and training. By the autumn of 2012, Hezbollahi armed formations were operating in Syria, especially along the border, and in twenty-three villages inhabited by Lebanese Shi‘a, including Lebanese citizens whose villages are actually within Syria or difficult to reach except from the Syrian side of the international boundary. Party media began to memorialize Syrian-based fighters who were “fulfilling jihadist duties.” In late 2012 and early 2013, the militia extended its campaigns to Sunni border villages in Lebanon and Syria, and clashes and casualties increased in number, including veteran militia leaders such as ‘Ali Hussein Nassif, who was killed in October 2012. Reliable Hezbollah casualty figures are not available, but credible estimates point to nearly two hundred dead Hezbollahis by late 2013, a sizable number considering that many of the deaths were among its experienced frontline fighters. At that time, the full-time Hezbollah force, which was strengthened significantly by an extensive network of reserve fighters, numbered about two thousand.

The watershed moment came in April 2013 when Hezbollah graduated from a shadow participant on the geographic margins to a major combatant in the Syrian civil war. Hezbollah fighters were in the vanguard that month as Syrian government forces fought to retake al-Qusayr, a strategic border town that commands access to the contested city of Homs, which is twenty

miles to the northeast and a short drive from the Lebanese city of Hermel, a Hezbollah stronghold. The Free Syrian Army (FSA) had controlled al-Qusayr since April 2011, and Syrian army forces put the city under siege in November 2011 but were unable to recapture it until May 2013. The Hezbollah offensive decimated al-Qusayr, which was an enormous blow for the FSA. Hezbollah's role was angrily condemned in Europe, the United States, and in much of the Middle East, and certainly in many Lebanese circles.

On May 25, 2013, "Resistance and Liberation Day"—the thirteenth anniversary of the liberation of south Lebanon from occupation—Nasrallah made a direct reference to Hezbollah's intervention, emphasizing the critical importance of Syria to Lebanon and especially to Hezbollah. It would be "stupid," he said, given the potential threats from Syria for Hezbollah, to remain on the sidelines. In this speech Nasrallah also made numerous references to the threat posed by *takfiri* elements that are the dominant forces in the Syrian opposition. The term "*takfiri*" is often used to refer to Sunni Salafists who espouse an essentialist conception of Islam and typically view the Shi'a as polytheists and apostates who deserve to be slaughtered. A cynic might gloss Nasrallah's focus on *takfiris* as a none too subtle appeal to Western policymakers, but it is fair to note that the prospect of living cheek by jowl with a larger neighbor dominated by *takfiri* militants would inspire unease in many places, not just Hezbollah's command center.

In Syria, Hezbollah pursues three key objectives: First, to insure that its overland supply route from Iran and through Iraq and Syria and to Lebanon is not jeopardized. Integral to the first objective is the second objective of preserving the regime of Bashar al-Asad—a regime that operates largely to the benefit of the minority 'Alawi sect. Given Hezbollah's immense efforts to preserve the present regime, it is hard to imagine any replacement regime dominated by Syria's majority Sunni leaders being sympathetic to Hezbollah's interests, especially given the unleashed Sunni-Shi'i enmity in today's Syria. The third goal is to insure the security of Lebanon, and this was a significant factor in Hezbollah joining the battle in al-Qusayr. Over the course of the Syrian civil war Hezbollah has been intent to prevent hostile forces from gaining a foothold in areas bordering Lebanon. The third strategic objective complements the Syrian government's focus on preserving the Damascus-Hama-Homs-Aleppo and Latakia land corridor.

Latakia and the surrounding region in the northwest is the homeland for the politically dominant 'Alawis.

Incredibly, in his 2013 address Nasrallah suggested to his fellow Lebanese that life should go on normally in Lebanon and that whatever violence occurs in Syria should stay in Syria (where over 100,000 people had died in the civil war as of August 2013). He argued:

You are fighting in Syria and we are fighting in Syria. Let us fight there. Do you want frankness more than this? Let us fight there. Let us put Lebanon aside. Why should we fight in Lebanon? There are different viewpoints, different visions, and different diagnosis of duty. That is OK; but let us keep Lebanon away from the fighting, conflict, and bloody confrontations.

One of the fiercest and perhaps the most consequential regional response to Hezbollah's high-profile intervention came from Shaikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the influential Doha-based cleric who (until his recent subsequent retirement from broadcasting) reached millions of Arab Muslims via al-Jazeera, the satellite TV station. On May 31, 2013, al-Qaradawi, who had previously defended Hezbollah when it was under fire from Saudi Arabia, now confessed that he had been wrong: "It seems that the clerics of Saudi Arabia were more mature than me." Al-Qaradawi now declared that "every Muslim trained to fight and capable of doing that [must] make himself available" to support the Syrian rebels. Referring to Iran and to the Hizb al-Shaytan (the party of the devil), he argued that their intention was to massacre Muslims, and every able Muslim has a personal duty (*fard 'ayn*) to join the fight. Al-Qaradawi's call to action not only bolstered efforts to fight Hezbollah, but also further undermined the more secular wing of the Syrian opposition. Given al-Qaradawi's standing, it was a major development.

The blowback from Syria also reached the heart of Hezbollah's support, namely, the southern Beirut neighborhoods of al-dahiya, in the form of rocket fire in May 2013. Car bombs are hardly a novelty in Lebanon, and these opprobrious devices for killing, maiming, and terrorizing civilians have been a staple in the arsenals of combatants in Syria and Iraq. Unfortunately, the frequency and lethality of car bombings in Lebanon

grew. On the first day of Ramadan in July 2013, a car bomb exploded in Bir al-‘Abd adjacent to a supermarket, wounding fifty-three people. The following month a deadlier car bomb nearby killed twenty-seven people. Hezbollah’s Deputy Secretary General Na‘im Qassem insinuated that Israel was responsible for the blasts, but within Lebanon the perpetrators were widely understood to be elements within the Syrian opposition who were, presumably, making good on their promise to bring the war to Hezbollah in Lebanon. Although the Free Syrian Army (FSA) condemned the July bombing, a component of the FSA claimed credit for it within days and promised more to come. In Syria, elements of the FSA handed out candies to celebrate the attacks, which underlined the futility of Nasrallah’s wishful suggestion to keep the Syrian fighting away from Lebanon.

In response to these attacks, Nasrallah lashed out by promising payback: “our hands will reach you.” He suggested that Hezbollah would vastly expand its forces in Syria. Later in August 2013, two car bombs detonated adjacent to mosques in predominantly Sunni Tripoli as Friday prayers were under way. Nearly fifty people were killed. It was no accident that the targeted mosques were associated with shaikhs known to be hostile to Hezbollah. One of them, Shaikh Salem al-Rafi‘i, an ally of Ahmad al-Assir, earlier had issued a fatwa in which he called on Muslims to join the battle in Syria and against Hezbollah. The Unification (*al-tawhid*) Movement, which has long enjoyed good relations with Iran, and in recent years with Syria, carried out the bombing. Lebanese police arrested two Lebanese clerics affiliated with *al-tawhid* in connection with the Tripoli bombings, one of whom, Ahmad al-Gharib, reportedly confessed to a role and implicated Syrian security agents.

Rebel forces made significant gains in the months preceding the Hezbollah intervention in al-Qasayr. In fact, the bloodiest period of the civil war was from 2011 to 2013, when upwards of 130,000 people died violently, including more than 46,000 civilians. The opposition forces enjoyed momentum in Aleppo, Syria’s second city, and they were winning victories in the Idlib province in the north. In the northeast, the city of Raqqa was being contested, and much of the southern governate of Daraa that borders Jordan and was the site for the earliest demonstrations in 2011, was under rebel control. Around Damascus there was intense fighting. Opposition forces won footholds in several urban districts.

Later in 2013 and in 2014, Hezbollah militiamen fought alongside of the Syria army and the multinational 'Abbas Brigade in Damascus and Aleppo, where rebel encroachments were multiplying. By 2014, Iran significantly increased its deployment to Syria, particularly in the form of contingents of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps. The Iranians were notably involved in intelligence work, training and advising Syrian forces, providing combat fire support, and supplying special operations units. The scale of Iran's involvement during the civil war is suggested by casualty figures. In May 2017, Mohammad Ali Shahidi Mahallati, director of the Iran's Martyrs Foundation, announced that about 2,100 of Iran's combatants had died in Syria. The numbers were not broken down by nationality, but it is safe to assume that a fifth or more were of Iranian nationals (including four known general officers), while the remainder would include recruits from Iraq, Pakistan, and especially from Afghanistan's Hazara Shi'i community. The largest number of battle deaths among Shi'i militias has been sustained by Hezbollah, which lost at least 1,100 fighters in Syria by late 2017. Hezbollah has obscured casualty figures and it is certainly possible that hundreds of fatalities have eluded notice. Omitted from these figures are the many fighters who have been severely wounded or maimed.

By 2014, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) became a major factor in the fighting in Syria and next door in Iraq. Early in the year, ISIS controlled the Iraqi cities of Fallajuh and Ramadi, and much of Iraq's Anbar Province. In June, it seized Mosul, Iraq's second city, as well as the key cities of Tikrit and Tal Afar, while also posing a threat to Baghdad. By late summer 2014, ISIS controlled over 40 percent of Iraqi territory. Speaking from the pulpit of Mosul's Grand al-Nuri Mosque in June 2014, its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared the establishment of an Islamic caliphate with its capital in Raqqa, Syria, which it fully controlled in 2014. ISIS simultaneously renamed itself as the Islamic State. Meanwhile, al-Qaeda's subsidiary, Jabhat al-Nusrah, was gaining control of Syria's Idlib province, which it consolidated in 2015 after defeating rival Western-backed militia groups.

By the summer of 2015, the civil war appeared to be at a stalemate. Desertions, evasion of military service, fatigue and casualties depleted the Syrian military, quite aside from the questionable loyalties of predominantly Sunni army units. Iran's financial and military support, not

to mention Hezbollah's intervention, was instrumental in insuring the regime's survival, but reversing rebels' gains was another matter. Hezbollah was now keeping about 8,000 fighting men in Syria without much likelihood of a sizable increase in the contingent, many of whom were deployed for only a month at a time. Within the Shi'i community there was strong support for Hezbollah's intervention in Syria.²

Syria seemed headed for a dystopian future in which large swaths of the country would be governed by a variety of competing militia groups enjoying sponsorship by the United States, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Qatar, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates, or, as in the case of ISIS, self-sustaining through taxation, extortion, and the control of resources, specifically, oil.

This bleak prognosis was upended on September 30, 2015, by the Russian intervention in support of the Syrian government. Russia's entrance to the battle entailed the introduction of a fleet of combat aircraft, an upgrading of Syrian armor, additional artillery, and complements of advisors and troops. Upgraded joint-operations centers began to function in Latakia and Damascus with palpable improvements in combat coordination. Russia announced that its purpose was to attack terrorists such as ISIS, as well as to assist the government in recapturing territory held by opposition groups (many of which were supported by the U.S. or its coalition partners), but it focused in the air campaign far more on recapturing territory in northwestern Syria than on attacking ISIS. The Russians were successful in reaching "de-confliction" arrangements with the United States and Jordan, and eventually with Turkey as well. De-confliction not only reduced the risk of clashes between Russian and other external forces, but it partitioned the battlefield to allow government forces a freer hand to attack and weaken opposition groups.

By late 2015, momentum was beginning to shift in favor of the Syrian government. President Barack Obama predicted that Russia would find itself in a "quagmire." Instead, the Kremlin shifted the terms of battle and rejuvenated Bashar al-Asad's war effort. Meanwhile, in Iraq, the odd fellow duo of the U.S. and Iran found themselves supporting the grinding, bloody campaign to dislodge ISIS from cities such as Fallujah, Ramadi, Tal Afar, and Mosul. As ISIS progressively lost footholds in Iraq, some of the Shi'i

militiamen who had been fighting in Iraq shifted their efforts to Syria, where they added combat power to the government coalition.

A United Nations–negotiated ceasefire was initiated in February 2016, but it unraveled by June after many violations of its terms, particularly by government forces. Beginning in June, Syrian forces with heavy participation by Hezbollah began a campaign to recapture the Aleppo region and the eastern half of the city controlled by opposition forces. Russian aerial bombing played a key role in weakening and eventually pulverizing the opposition’s defenses. The campaign finally succeeded by December 2016 when Aleppo was completely restored to Syrian government control. The surviving defenders and many supporting civilians, all of whom were living in wretched conditions, were bussed to Idlib province, which remains in opposition hands. Aleppo has long been not only the economic engine for Syria, but the site of one of the great but now destroyed suqs in the world. It is also a city with a cultural and intellectual identity that is quite distinct from that of Damascus. The December victory must be judged a key turning point in the civil war.

In July 2017, Hezbollah launched a campaign against the jihadists of Jabhat Fatah al-Sham³ in the Lebanon-Syria border region near the Lebanese town of Aarsal. The Lebanese Army subsequently launched its own operation against ISIS elements on the Lebanese side of the border. Hezbollah did its best to upstage the Lebanese army, angering many Lebanese officials and officers. Hezbollah subsequently, in early August, cut a deal to permit several hundred fighters and their families to board a fleet of 26 buses for transport into Syria. The convoy was impeded by U.S. action to prevent its movement. Jihadists attempting to link up with the convoy were picked off by U.S. air strikes. Only in late September were the remaining elements of the convoy allowed to proceed, after the U.S. and Russia negotiated. Eleven buses carrying jihadists reached Mayadin in eastern Syria.

Beginning in December 2016, Russia, Syria, Iran, and Turkey began a series of negotiations in Astana, Kazakhstan. The U.S. had an observer present for some of the meetings, which were held periodically in 2017. The objective of the meetings strongly reflects the Russian project of creating “de-escalation” zones in Syria. Such zones are drawn to include areas where opposition forces maintain a significant presence, and would include

Idlib and the western approaches to Aleppo, the region between the cities of Homs and Hama, the Damascus region, and the southern region adjacent to Jordan. (Something of a prototype for the de-escalation zones is the ceasefire that was announced in July 2017, after Presidents Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump met in Germany on the sidelines of the G-20 summit, which covers the southern region adjacent to Jordan.)

One element of the Russian plan is the idea that air-strikes might be suspended in the de-escalation zones, and ground activities would be monitored by regime ally Iran and Russia, as well as Turkey, depending on the area. The Syrian government is to permit unhindered humanitarian access to the zones, as well as to proceed with the restoration of public services. The clear premise for the Astana meetings was that the Bashar al-Asad government remains the decisive political authority in Syria. Opposition forces were generally highly skeptical of the Astana process, but they had no voice in the negotiations.

Notably, the zones discussed in Astana do not encompass the Kurdish-dominated area of prospective Rojava, or the eastern part of Syria where ISIS forces still hold sway in many village locales, although in October 2017 ISIS was expunged from Raqqa, which ISIS had claimed as its capital. Notably, the U.S. aligned and U.S. supported Syrian Democratic Forces that defeated ISIS in Raqqa is a coalition of Arab and Kurdish forces, in which the Kurds are the dominant component. Given Turkey's phobia about any suggestion of an independent Kurdish entity, in Syria, northern Iraq or elsewhere, it is easy to imagine an imbroglio erupting as the Kurds seek to enjoy the political fruits of their military prowess.

On August 4, 2017, following Hezbollah's successful confrontation in the Lebanon-Syria border region, Secretary General Hasan Nasrallah declared in a televised speech: "We have won in the war (in Syria) ... and what remains are scattered battles." The evidence suggests that Nasrallah is largely correct. Any addendum to his speech would have to include that the campaign against the rebels was conducted by the Syrian government and often by its allies, such as Hezbollah, with great savagery and routine violations of most fundamentals tenets of the laws of warfare. Hospitals were regularly and repeatedly attacked, as in Idlib in September 2017 when three separate and clearly demarcated hospitals were bombed; civilians were forced to suffer horrendous sieges, deprived of the most basic

ingredients of life; humanitarian relief columns were attacked, delayed, and often not permitted to operate at all; and, as a result, nearly six million Syrians now live outside the country as refugees in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and other countries, and easily that many are displaced internally. Of course, the opposition groups have been no great protectors of basic rights. One only has to think of the savage brutality of ISIS as an obvious example; however, in terms of magnitude, it is the Syrian government that deserves to be buried in opprobrium, and, one day, one hopes, called to account for its barbarous crimes against its own people.

In July 2017, the World Bank estimated that over the course of the Syrian civil war (2011–2017), Syria had lost \$226 billion in gross domestic product (GDP). This gargantuan sum is four times the 2010 GDP of Syria. Much of the country lies in ruins. Imagine the challenge of rebuilding infrastructure in a country where many of the hospitals have been deliberately attacked, where many of the schools have been flattened, where most roads require major repairs, where electrical grid is in tatters, where businesses have been ravaged, and historical sites of global importance have been incinerated, looted, and destroyed. One preliminary professional estimate puts the basic rebuilding bill at least \$180 billion. Where will that money come from? From its impoverished citizens? Certainly not from the coffers of the national treasury, nor from the parties that fought the war. Given the despicable record of Bashar al-Asad and his regime, it will take more than holding one's nose for Western countries to pour money into Syrian rebuilding. If there is to be a winner in Syria, it will have been truly pyrrhic.

Russian efforts to create de-escalation zones may succeed in lowering the scale of violence and even restoring some basic services, but the country will remain in pieces. Significant parts of Syria are likely to elude government control, especially the Kurdish region to the north, Idlib province in the northwest where opposition forces are now most concentrated, eastern Syria where scattered remnants of ISIS survive, and where the U.S. sponsored Syrian Democratic Front competes with Syrian forces for control of strategic cities, such as Dayr al-Zur. Under these circumstances, it is easy enough to imagine that Iran will remain embroiled in Syria in support of the regime and Hezbollah will remain unable to end its entanglement.

¹ See the essential recent account by Bernard Rougier, *The Sunni Tragedy in the Middle East: Northern Lebanon from al-Qaeda to ISIS* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2016).

² “The large majority of the Hezbollah’s popular base is now convinced that the movement’s survival depends on its ability to assist the Syrian regime to remain in power. This support goes beyond the Hezbollah members, as 78.7 percent of the Lebanese Shi’a approve of the intervention in Syria according to a 2015 survey by the association Haya Bina, whose founder, Mr. Lokman Slim, is known for its critical stance towards the party.” Marie Kostrz, “Le Hezbollah maître du jeu libanais.” *Le Monde Diplomatique*, April 2016, pp. 6–7, www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2016/04/KOSTRZ/55214.

³ In 2016, Jabhat al-Nusra, the affiliate of al-Qaeda, renamed itself as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (Front for Levant Conquest) and declared that it was now separated from al-Qaeda. In January 2017, the group merged with several other groups as Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (Organization for Levant Conquest). Even so, it is often simply referred to as al-Nusra.

Conclusion

The outcome of the catastrophic Syrian civil war is plain to see. The regime in Damascus has emerged the victor, even though its domain is a country in ruins. The scaling down of heavy combat in Syria exposes Lebanon to new challenges, and equally so, Hezbollah, which contributed substantially to the defeat of the rebel forces. Hezbollah's continuing role in Syria and elsewhere in the region, its prominence in Lebanon, as well as the fact that it is widely seen as a manifestation of Iran's geopolitical ambition, insure that a variety of Arab states will seek to undermine and weaken the group, embolden its Lebanese adversaries, and foster discontent in Lebanon. From the side of Hezbollah and its allies, there will be pressure on the Lebanese government to draw closer to the Bashar al-Asad-led regime in Damascus as conditions stabilize in Syria. Saudi Arabia may be expected to thwart these efforts with ready support from Washington.

In October 2017, President Donald Trump announced a new policy focused on thwarting Iran's influence in the Middle East, and particularly confronting the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, which has been active in Iraq and Syria and in support of Hezbollah.

U.S.-Iran Conflict?

In contrast to his predecessor, Barack Obama, Trump is jettisoning the idea of improved relations between Iran and the U.S. in favor of a more adversarial position. During his political campaign Donald Trump often pointed to the nuclear agreement with Iran (formally named the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action[JCPOA]) as the worst agreement that the U.S. had ever reached. Once in office, President Trump's avowed disdain for the deal continued. In October 2017, despite widespread evidence that Iran was in full compliance with its obligations under JCPOA and notwithstanding the recommendations of his secretaries of defense and

state, Trump refused to certify (as required by the U.S. Congress) that Iran was in compliance. Pointing to Iran's objectionable actions, such as support for Hezbollah, he insisted that Iran was not living up to the "spirit" of the deal. By doing so, Trump won plaudits from the Israeli and Saudi governments, but few accolades outside the region. In May 2018, Trump followed the logic of his critique and announced that the U.S. was withdrawing from the deal. The other five signatories to JCPOA declared their commitment to maintain JCPOA in force, but Trump's action puts a question mark on the tenability of JCPOA. Should the agreement collapse, Iran could resume its nuclear program and thereby provoke the U.S. to intervene to derail the program. Whether Trump's Iran policy will result in military action against Iran, or Hezbollah, remains to be seen, but that possibility cannot be discounted.



The home of the Lebanese Parliament (officially: the majlis al-nawab, or Chamber of Deputies) where the balance of power between Hezbollah and its adversaries has shifted periodically since the party joined the electoral process in 1992. Copyright © A. R. Norton.

Trump's stance also buttresses Saudi efforts to confront Iran. The U.S. administration shares the view expressed emphatically by Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman that Iran (as well as Hezbollah) is a malign supporter of Houthi forces in Yemen, who, in 2015, seized the capital of Sana'a and forced the president to flee. In response, the Saudis and key allies, especially the United Arab Emirates, intervened. By the end of 2017, they failed to defeat the Houthis, although horrid suffering has been inflicted upon the civilian population through bombing, blockades, water and food shortages, and rampant disease, including widespread cholera. Iran's purportedly villainous actions are a long-standing motif of Saudi foreign policy, but Muhammad bin Salman's rise to power in 2015 has heralded a new energy for checking Iran's influence, yet without substantial success and with questions about the underlying wisdom of the newly aggressive Saudi strategy.

A Bizarre Resignation

Another example of bin Salman's risk-taking is Lebanon. In November 2017, the Saudis summoned Lebanese Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri to Riyadh. Saad's father, the late Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri, earned his massive fortune as a contractor in Saudi Arabia. Saad, like his father, holds dual citizenship in Lebanon and Saudi Arabia. The Saudis hold considerable political and economic leverage over al-Hariri. Shortly after his arrival in Riyadh, Saad met with Muhammad bin Salman, and then he appeared on Saudi state television to read a statement announcing his resignation as prime minister. The statement cited threats to his life and the perfidious activities of Iran. Normal practice in Lebanon is for the prime minister to present his resignation to the president, who would then begin the process of canvassing across the political spectrum to identify a new nominee for the post. Saad's action surprised and astonished even his closest advisors, and it was quickly understood within Lebanon that he had been pressured to act, presumably as part of an effort to undermine the legitimacy of the Lebanese government in which Hezbollah enjoys outsize power. President Michel Aoun refused to accept the resignation, arguing that al-Hariri should return to Lebanon and present his resignation in person. Hezbollah's initial response to the resignation was low-keyed. In an analysis of the

developments in Riyadh, Secretary General Hasan Nasrallah unpacked what transpired and focused on the Saudi role in orchestrating the resignation, as well as blocking the freedom of al-Hariri to travel to Lebanon for nearly two weeks following his televised resignation.

U.S. foreknowledge of the Saudi action is unclear. President Trump has tweeted in broad support of the crown prince, and members of his administration, including son-in-law Jared Kushner, met in Riyadh with Muhammad bin Salman days before the induced resignation. In contrast, after several days' delay, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and then the White House issued statements upholding Lebanon's sovereignty and its political institutions, including "Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri." Without mentioning Hezbollah by name, the U.S. emphasized the importance of the country's legitimate security forces, as opposed to militia forces. It bears recalling that the U.S. supported the Lebanese armed forces with aid totaling \$1.4 billion since 2005, and \$160 million in 2016–2017.

An open question is whether another leading Sunni politician would be willing to occupy the post of prime minister despite Saudi opposition. The answer is probably "yes," eventually, but there is no doubt that the Saudis have introduced a new factor for instability into Lebanon. The risk for Hezbollah is that without what passes for a functioning government in Beirut, many of Lebanon's Sunni Muslims will lack a political voice at the government level and may be tempted (and paid) to take their demands to the streets. If part of the Saudi complaint is that figures such as Saad al-Hariri lend legitimacy to Hezbollah by cooperating with the group, then it is easy to imagine efforts in the shadows and in open daylight to weaken governance so as to discredit Hezbollah.

Even without Saudi Arabia's involvement, Hezbollah faces a variety of challenges in the years ahead, including in Syria. where the phases of heavy combat may be over but much remains unsettled. Through unspeakable brutality and with ample assistance from Russia, Iran, Hezbollah, and other externally recruited militias, the Syrian government gained the upper hand. Remaining rebel forces are too weak to prevail strategically, but they retain the power to thwart the authority of the Damascus regime in several regions of the country. As noted in [chapter 8](#), there will be no grand finale to the civil war in Syria wherein the state is reconstituted, regains full control of the republic's territory, and belligerents come to terms. This is why many of

the external combatants, including Hezbollah, may remain entangled in Syria for the foreseeable future. Hezbollah's continuing presence not only requires that it divert resources that might otherwise be used in Lebanon, but it also increases the likelihood that Israel will continue to intervene to interdict weapons shipments as well as to prevent the group from establishing positions in Syria that might be used for launching attacks upon Israel.

The Astana Process and the Overlapping Interests of Iran and Turkey

The Russia-inspired Astana negotiation process, discussed in [chapter 8](#), may succeed in creating de-escalation zones in which non-violent *modi vivendi* between rebel groups and government forces prevail, but skepticism is justified about the durability of these arrangements. The Syrian government has a poor record of living up to its promises and its humanitarian obligations, and its forces have a penchant for vindictiveness. Mistrust in the government's fidelity to a ceasefire is justified. Government encouraged "non-official" militias may operate in the shadows in rebel held areas and destabilize any deal that has been reached. The mixed objectives of competing opposition groups also make it difficult for anti-government fighters to cooperate with one another.

Russia has succeeded in bringing Turkey and Iran into the negotiating process, which provides a forum for the two regional powers to accommodate their otherwise contradictory interests in Syria. One point of agreement between the two is thwarting the political agenda of Syrian Kurds. Less than 10 percent of Syrians are Kurds, and for the most part their home villages and towns are found in north and northeastern Syria, especially near the juncture of Syria, Turkey, and Iraq. The Kurds are Muslims but they are a distinct ethnicity, speaking a unique Indo-European language. Their ethnic brethren live in Turkey, where they account for as much as one-fifth of the population, as well as large communities in Iraq and Iran. In all, there are about 28 million Kurds in the Middle East, in addition to significant diaspora communities around the globe. Over the course of the civil war, the Kurds have been assembling an autonomous region, which they call Rojava (from the Kurdish term for western

Kurdistan). Largely under the leadership of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and through the successes of several militias but especially the People's Protection Units (YPG), a nearly contiguous region has emerged. Rather than confronting the Damascus government, the Syrian Kurds exploited the government's absence and weakness to consolidate Rojava. They have benefited from the support of Iraqi Kurds, who have offered sanctuary, military expertise, and support.

The Kurds' quest for full autonomy in Rojava remains to be reconciled with Damascus, not to mention the adamant opposition of Turkey, which rejects any model for Kurdish self-determination for fear that it will inspire similar impulses among Turkey's large Kurdish population. Iran has a similar concern regarding its own indigenous Kurdish population. It remains to be seen what steps Iran and allied groups, such as Hezbollah, may undertake to undermine the aspirations of Syrian Kurds. Turkey will likely remain engaged in northern Syria vis-à-vis the Kurds, as well as with residual forces of the Arab opposition, which it supports, especially those based in Idlib province.

The Dismantling of the ISIS Caliphate

The capture of Raqqa at the hands of the U.S.-supported Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), in October 2017, is a major accomplishment and a symbol of the decline of ISIS as a political entity. Raqqa, now largely devastated and controlled by the SDF, is the Syrian city where ISIS established the de facto capital for its self-proclaimed caliphate. ISIS members remain present in some villages in the Euphrates River valley, but they are more likely to pose a threat as insurgents rather than as a significant military force in Syria or Iraq. The ISIS ideology is another matter in terms of its potency for recruiting jihadists in other parts of the region (perhaps including among the large Syrian refugee community in Lebanon) and the world.

The long-term status of the SDF is obviously dependent upon the constancy of purpose of the U.S., which has provided crucial combat support to the force, as well as the durability of the Arab-Kurdish coalition that the force represents. Equally important, the Syrian government, with or without Russian and Iranian support, may insist that the U.S. withdraw its forces, arguing that they—in contrast to Russian forces, for instance—have

no legal standing to be in Syria. Should the U.S. then refuse to withdraw, the possibility of clashes with progovernment forces, including Hezbollah, cannot be discounted.

Lebanon's Problematic Economic Picture

Over the course of the Syrian civil war, annual economic growth has been only about two percent. The government is saddled by gargantuan debt that equals 150 percent of gross domestic product, as well as large deficits in current account spending. Underlying the challenging fiscal picture is rampant corruption, which siphons vast amounts of government resources. It comes as no surprise that foreign direct investment in Lebanon has almost disappeared since 2011. Among the Arab states, only Libya is the recipient of less foreign investment.

Expatriate Lebanese, including the large numbers of Lebanese Shi'a who live and work in Africa, regularly return large sums of hard currency to their native villages, towns, and cities where nominal state services are often far from adequate, but these monies only supplement rather than replace regular income, and the size of remittances has decreased in recent years. On the individual level, prosperity eludes many Lebanese, particularly young adults. Youth unemployment remains high—according to 2016 data, it reached 36 percent—and it is an important driver for emigration.

In good years, affluent tourists flood into Lebanon, buttress the economy, fill hotels and restaurants to capacity in summer months, and some leave large deposits in Beirut's banks. After years of reduced tourism, an uptick in hotel occupancy in 2017 reflected a decline in the intensity of combat in Syria. However, conditions within Lebanon matter easily as much, and in times of instability, well-heeled guests are quick to leave. Tourism normally accounts for as much as 22 percent of national income, and the arrival rate of tourists is a barometer of the country's political stability and economic health. The rampant violence in Syria since 2011 and the spillover into Lebanon prompted a significant downturn in tourist visits. In 2013, several of the prosperous Gulf Arab states announced that Lebanon was unsafe and urged their citizens to stay away. In February 2016, they repeated the announcement and urged their subjects to avoid

travel to Lebanon. Above and beyond legitimate concern about security risks, there was a desire to signal displeasure with Hezbollah and its influence in Lebanon, which was certainly the case in November 2017 when Saudi Arabia again urged its citizens to leave Lebanon.

In recent years, influxes of funds from the Gulf, particularly from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, helped to maintain stability in Lebanon's well-managed banking sector, which is governed by the Bank of Lebanon (officially, Banque du Liban or Masraf Lubnan). The bank enjoys statutory autonomy from the endemically corrupt and often dysfunctional political system. Even so, the banking sector suffers when Lebanon is on the brink of conflict, if not in the grip of widespread violence. Capital seeks safer harbors. In addition, wealthy Arab states may further weaken Lebanon's troubled economy by withholding or withdrawing funds.

Saudi Arabia has become aggressive in punishing Lebanon financially. Some background is necessary: On January 2, 2016, the kingdom carried out a death sentence imposed on Nimr Baqir al-Nimr, a well-known Shi'i cleric and Saudi citizen. Al-Nimr—from al-Awamiyah in the Eastern province of Saudi Arabia where most of the kingdom's Shi'i minority is found—was a vocal critic of the regime. For encouraging public protests, he was convicted of terrorism related offenses. The day following al-Nimr's execution, an angry Hasan Nasrallah accused the Saudis of intentionally fomenting Sunni-Shi'i strife across the Middle East. Nasrallah noted that al-Nimr had been killed for criticizing the Saudi regime rather than carrying out violence.

In reaction to the execution, a number of protests were staged around the world, including in Iran, where demonstrators attacked Saudi diplomatic missions in Tehran and Mashhad. In response, Saudi Arabia cut diplomatic relations with the Islamic Republic. In February 2016, Lebanon failed to join other Arab League members in condemning the anti-Saudi protests. The Saudis retaliated by canceling \$4 billion in promised military aid for Lebanon. A month later, the Gulf Cooperation Council, following Saudi Arabia's lead, declared that Hezbollah was a terrorist organization. The Arab League and the Organization for Islamic Cooperation followed suit.

Hezbollah's finances are not directly dependent on Lebanon's economy, and Nasrallah has candidly acknowledged that Iran is its major source of

funds. Following the ratcheting up of U.S. anti-Hezbollah financial sanctions in 2016, he stated:

Hizbollah's budget, its income, its expenses, everything it eats and drinks, its weapons and rockets, come from the Islamic Republic of Iran.... As long as Iran has money, we have money.¹

The pivotal role of Iranian largesse is obvious, but if Lebanon is in an economic malaise then Hezbollah supporters are more dependent on party-provided services. In 2016 and 2017, Hezbollah imposed funding cuts in cultural, social, educational, and medical operations for civilians. The cuts were directly related to Hezbollah's heavy involvement in Syria: As the deployments grew, direct costs escalated for salaries, training, and equipment, as did indirect costs in terms of support and care for wounded fighters, subsidies to the families of martyrs, and the building of an extensive support network. This is not to suggest a precipitous drop in support within the Shi'i community for Hezbollah, or particularly for its deployment to Syria, but it does suggest a factor that could erode support over time, especially if the funding reductions deepen.

The economic challenges are made worse by the humanitarian burden confronting Lebanon as a result of the massive influx of refugees from Syria. Most of the refugees are Sunni Muslims, as are the majority of Syrians. Over six million people have been internally displaced within Syria, and another five million people are refugees. By order of magnitude, refugees have fled to Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and other countries. In Lebanon, one million people are officially registered as refugees with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and as many as half a million others have fled to Lebanon but avoided registration. The Lebanese government refers to Syrian refugees as "temporarily displaced persons" and insists that they must return to Syria. To maintain legal status, most Syrian refugees are required to pay an annual \$200 fee, which is often beyond the means of many of them and therefore increases the risks of exploitation and forecloses finding gainful employment. Quite aside from considerations of personal safety in Syria—where the government is often savagely vengeful toward opponents—the devastation of housing and basic infrastructure, not to mention the ravaged Syrian economy, are hardly

conducive to encouraging repatriation. It is a safe assumption that millions of Syrian refugees will remain outside their homeland for years to come, including the multitudes that fled to Lebanon, notwithstanding the harsh declared policy of the Lebanese government. The looming question is whether regional and international donors will step up to provide the funding necessary to meet the basic needs of these refugees, including shelter, medical care, education and food. As of October 2017, the UNHCR reported that only 30 percent of its \$2 billion budget for refugees in Lebanon has been met. The resultant humanitarian challenge is obvious, as is the potential security challenge, particularly should domestic or external players seek to stir up trouble. Given the prominent role played by Hezbollah against the predominantly Sunni rebel forces in Syria, it is not difficult to imagine the contours of future clashes between radicalized refugees and Hezbollah.

Another Israel-Hezbollah War?

Always looming, in addition to the dangers associated with implication in Syria's civil conflict, is the prospect of another round of war between Israel and Hezbollah. Since 2006, the southern border between Lebanon and Israel has remained mostly quiet, but both sides are preparing for the next war, which they promise will be more extensive and more deadly than the last. Hezbollah's *bête noire* insists that it remains arm's length from the fighting in Syria. However, despite official silence, the Israeli air force has conducted scores of attacks on targets in Syria, especially since 2013. These attacks have degraded Syrian air defenses, destroyed Syrian weapon depots and destroyed or interdicted many arms transfers to Hezbollah. Even so, Hezbollah has assembled an inventory of at least 120,000 missiles and rockets in Lebanon, according to credible estimates. This means that Hezbollah has a missile arsenal many times larger than it possessed in 2006. While the initiation of a war by Israel cannot be discounted, perhaps with the encouragement of the White House and certainly with generous U.S. support, for now Israel and Hezbollah remain in a tense standoff. The likelihood of a decisive victory by either side is low, as serious Israeli analysts concede. A new war would be deeply destructive. Israel would leave a landscape of devastation in Lebanon, while suffering substantial

human and structural losses, without a stable or necessarily improved outcome for either adversary.

Navigating Hostile Seas

Hezbollah is the nemesis of many Lebanese, including some segments of the Shi'i community, a variety of Christians and a majority of the Sunni community. Although reviled by its many adversaries, both inside and outside Lebanon, it retains robust support at home, especially within the Shi'i community, as well as among significant numbers of Christians. It is Lebanon's most powerful and best organized political player, and the country's preeminent military force. Notwithstanding Hezbollah's clout, the Lebanese political system divides and fragments influence and necessitates coalitions and bargaining in order to govern. A powerful player like Hezbollah may stymie politics, as it has sometimes done in recent years, but it must compromise in order to advance an agenda. In other words, the realities of Lebanese politics and the inherent structural constraints of the system necessitate give and take. This is especially important because most of the Lebanese Shi'a do not enjoy a ready option to emigrate. They must make their way in Lebanon. As Hasan Nasrallah told the late-Rafiq al-Hariri during reconciliation discussions in 2000: "We don't possess second citizenship, we were born here, we will die here and we will be buried here. And we starve here and satisfy our appetite here, so nobody may outbid us on our patriotism or on [our right] to belong."² Given the array of adversaries who wish to see Hezbollah decimated, including the U.S., Israel, and Saudi Arabia, compromise may be a necessary condition for keeping its enemies at bay and its following intact.

¹ Quoted in International Crisis Group, *Hizbollah's Syrian Conundrum*, 2017, p. 19.

² The author wishes to thank Professor 'Ali Safa for finding Nasrallah's comment.

Glossary

- al-dahiya*—“the suburb”; usually understood in Lebanon to refer collectively to the southern suburbs of Beirut, where the Shi‘a predominate *al-da‘wa*—“the call” to Islam, a reference to the Shi‘i party (Hizb al-Da‘wa) founded in Iraq in 1958
- Amal—the Shi‘i reform group founded by Musa al-Sadr; Hezbollah’s main political rival in the Shi‘i community *Ashura*—literally, “the tenth”; refers to the tenth day of the Islamic month of Muharram, when the Imam Hussein, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, was martyred at Karbala *ayatollah*—literally, “sign of God”; refers to the learned Shi‘i scholars eligible to render *ijtihad* Ba‘th—literally, “renaissance”; refers to the Arab nationalist party, which has had pro-Iraq and pro-Syrian branches in Lebanon *fatwa* (pl., *fatawa*)—a religious ruling or opinion issued by a Muslim cleric
- Husseiniya*—a building used especially during Muharram for honoring Imam Hussein and members of his extended family, including his sister Zaynab *ijtihad*—a religious interpretation by a qualified Shi‘i scholar, usually an *ayatollah*
- imam*—the term used in Shi‘i Islam to refer to one of the twelve male successors to the Prophet, beginning with Imam ‘Ali and ending with the Twelfth Imam, who is believed to be in occultation (a state of being present but unseen). Sometimes, in a Shi‘i village for instance, the title *imam* simply refers to a local religious figure.
- Jabal ‘Amil—the venerable Shi‘i heartland in southern Lebanon that extends into the southern Beqaa valley *majlis* (pl., *majalis*)—literally, a place of sitting; a term often used to mean “parliament” or to refer to the gatherings of Shi‘a during Muharram to reflect on the meaning of Karbala *marji‘al-taqlid*—literally, a “source of imitation”; a leading *mujtahid* who is considered a reliable source of *ijtihad* by many Shi‘a

(for instance, Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah of Lebanon or ‘Ali Sistani of al-Najaf, Iraq) *mujtahid*—a cleric who is qualified to do *ijtihad*
Shaikh—a term of respect, often used to refer to learned Islamic scholars
Shari‘a—Islamic law
ta’ifiyya—confessionalism or sectarianism
ta‘ziya—in Lebanon, this refers to a mourning ritual (whereas in Iran it often refers to the dramatic performance of Hussein’s martyrdom and events surrounding the Karbala epic) *timthiliyya*—a performance, as in the dramatic re-creation of the tragedy of Karbala
za‘im (pl., *zu‘ama*)—political boss, usually with the connotation of a figure who dispenses patronage in exchange for support *ziyara* (pl., *ziyarat*)—a visit to the tomb or to a site associated with one of the twelve Shi‘i Imams or to other significant descendants of the prophet

Additional Reading

Lebanon is a complex country that observers all too quickly try to reduce to Christian-Muslim or sectarian labels, as though Lebanese fit into neat cultural boxes. Indeed, even officials who should know better are sometimes seduced by this sort of confessional typecasting, as though people's behavior is predetermined by a cultural nugget that is magically transmitted from one generation to the next. This is lazy thinking. If confession did determine behavior, the idea of a Lebanese nationality would be an illusion, civil war would be the norm, not the aberration, and Lebanon would be divided into a messy collection of emirates and enclaves. Instead, even in the early twenty-first century—when sectarian identities are peculiarly salient—we must take account of regional, class, or ideological differences, not to mention political jealousies and simple opportunism, to think sensibly about Lebanon and its politics.

For those who are provoked or curious to learn more about Lebanon and its complex history, there is probably no better starting place than Kamal Salibi's rich and elegantly written introduction to Lebanon, *A House of Many Mansions*. There are also several important accounts of the incremental collapse of Lebanon into civil war in 1975, and the many internal and external dimensions of violence since then, but Elizabeth Picard's incisive *A Shattered Country* is especially sophisticated yet accessible.

In recent decades, and for that matter over the past two centuries, Lebanon has been deeply affected by external powers. Israel has played a weighty role in Lebanon's history, and never more so than the momentous 1982 invasion and its aftermath that included the rise of Hezbollah. Ze'ev Schiff and Ehud Ya'ari's *Israel's Lebanon War* is an indispensable account of a grand plan gone wrong. Daniel Sobelman's more recent *New Rules of the Game* brings to bear many Hebrew and Arabic sources, and a detailed

knowledge of Lebanon, to analyze the Israeli confrontation with Hezbollah in southern Lebanon, particularly after the Israeli withdrawal in 2000.

Distant Relations, a volume edited by Houchang Chehabi, focuses on Lebanon's multifaceted connections with non-Arab Iran. The editor and the other contributors to the volume combine scholarly craftsmanship with sometimes unique insights into the five-hundred-year relationship between the two countries, as well as the role of Shi'i religious institutions and personalities in maintaining and redefining the liaison.

Until recent years the Arab Shi'i Muslim communities were often relegated to footnotes in scholarly publications. These communities in Lebanon, Bahrain, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and elsewhere have all been experiencing what is still best called "social mobilization." The term implies the changes wrought within the various Arab Shi'i communities by virtue of education, increased mobility, a growing awareness of momentous changes across borders through growing media access, as well as through pilgrimages and other travel experiences. Many of these aspects of change are anticipated in Fuad Khuri's brilliant *From Village to Suburb*, which focuses precisely on the southern suburbs of Beirut.

A variety of sometimes overlapping and momentous events have been particularly important in shaping the political consciousness of Arab Shi'i Muslims, including the Iranian revolution of 1978–79, and the Israeli and American interventions in Lebanon. The ensuing instability and violence gave rise to a number of books, the best among them arguably Robin Wright's *Sacred Rage*. If hijacking, the taking of hostages, and terrorism understandably captured the headlines a quarter of a century ago, by the mid-1980s leading Middle East scholars began to offer more broadly contextualized accounts of *Shi'ism and Social Protest*, to cite the still rewarding 1986 book edited by Juan Cole and Nikki Keddie. Two recent volumes—both notable for their accounts of Iraq and the other Arab Gulf states—include seasoned, clearly written surveys of *The Forgotten Muslims*, in the case of the book by Graham Fuller and Rend Francke, and the quests of several Arab Shi'i communities *Reaching for Power*, to cite Yitzhak Nakash's timely book. Vali Nasr offers a wider focus in *The Shi'a Revival*, where he examines the historical subordination of Shi'i Muslims to Sunni Muslim authority, and reveals growing signs of conflict and competition between the two major Islamic sects.

To the extent that Shi'i-Sunni tensions are growing in a variety of settings, no small part has been played by the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq in 2003. Jamal Sankari's biography, *Fadlallah*, offers a finely woven account of the Shi'i milieu in Iraq, in which Lebanon's Ayatollah Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah was a notable participant. Sankari's gem of a book also offers an essential account of the Lebanese context in which the cleric maneuvered. Fadlallah was a paramount Shi'i voice in Lebanon for three decades.

Only in the early 1980s did an extensive literature on the Shi'i community in Lebanon begin to develop. My book, *Amal and the Shi'a*, made possible by a fortuitously timed adventure in southern Lebanon as the leader of a UN peacekeeping team in 1980 and 1981, came at a time when rather one-dimensional views of Shi'i Muslims prevailed in much of the press and within the U.S. government. The volume focused on the early political mobilization of the Shi'i community by Sayyid Musa al-Sadr and the role of his Amal movement, as well as on the impact of Israeli and Palestinian actions on the radicalization of the community. Fouad Ajami, a Shi'i native of the southern Lebanese village of Arnoun who became a major public intellectual and policy advocate in the U.S., crafted *The Vanished Imam*, an elegant and Conrad-esque saga of Musa al-Sadr.

Younger scholars from Lebanon later made noteworthy contributions to our knowledge of Shi'i politics in Lebanon, and especially of Hezbollah.¹ Nizar Hamzeh is a longtime student of Shi'i politics, and his *In the Path of Hizbullah* offers capable and systematic analysis. Amal Saad-Ghorayeb concentrates, in *Hizbu'llah*, on the ideological development of the Shi'i party. Her assessment is comprehensive if occasionally too densely packed. *An Enchanted Modern* by the anthropologist Lara Deeb is a richly textured, insightful excursion into the contemporary Shi'i society in Lebanon. Deeb focuses especially on Shi'i women and how religion influences their identities. Unlike any of the other books available in English, Naim Qassem's *Hizbullah*, translated from Arabic, is by a consummate insider. Qassem is, of course, the deputy secretary-general of Hezbollah, and his discussion of a number of key decisions, such as the debate over participating in Lebanese elections, is often valuable and unexpectedly frank.

Finally, thanks to the wonder of Internet publishing, a solid special issue of the *MIT Electronic Journal of Middle East Studies*, titled “The Sixth War,” appeared only a few months after the July 2006 war. The issue includes extensive analyses of Hezbollah’s decision-making, war fighting, and postwar political orientation.

¹ Like many Arabic words, “Hezbollah” is subject to various transliterations. Here we have retained the original spelling in book titles in order to avoid confusion should readers search for a book in a library or bookstore, or merely wish to cite the title.

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Acknowledgments

My first encounter with the Shi'a of Lebanon came in the spring of 1980 in southern Lebanon. I was serving as an unarmed military observer with the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization and heading a small team charged with assisting the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). Early on, Timur Goksel, who was then the press information officer for UNIFIL, and I discussed the renewed activism within the Shi'i community. I also benefited from frequent discussions with the distinguished Chilean diplomat Jaime Holger, who was the political adviser to the commanding general of UNIFIL and who always offered an astute reading of Lebanese politics. It was then the sixth year of the Lebanese civil war—and only two years after Israel's 1978 invasion, the incident that had prompted the Security Council to create UNIFIL. The Palestine Liberation Organization, under Yasser Arafat's leadership, controlled much of Lebanon south of Beirut, but tensions between the PLO and the southern Shi'a were becoming violent, which was a natural concern for UNIFIL. Under UN instructions, I made contact with the local Shi'i leaders, as did two of my very talented colleagues—Desmond Travers of Ireland and Marc Vasco from France—also charter members of our little team. This was two years before Hezbollah would emerge in Lebanon, so I met frequently with members of the inchoate Amal movement, led nationally by Nabih Berri, and by the late Daoud Suleiman Daoud in the South (he was assassinated in 1988). For more than a year I enjoyed an unusually privileged, if fortuitous, entrée to local Shi'i politics. This was a protean moment in local Shi'i politics. Within a couple of years, growing suspicion toward the United States and the radicalization of Shi'i politics would make access much more difficult and, even for a period, foolhardy. Over the course of nearly 40 years, however, I have been able to return Lebanon periodically, sometimes even to continue conversations with the children of the men and women with whom the conversations first began.

From the start, I was more interested in understanding political trends and perspectives than in gathering names, and I usually promised my interlocutors that I would not publish their names unless they agreed to speak on the public record. If I had not respected this ground rule in those early days, and ever since, my access to Shi‘i politics would have been much more limited. I would like to thank two old friends who were extremely generous teachers. One, a Christian of gentle spirit but firm integrity, sprang from a Lebanese village on the Israeli border; he taught me a tremendous amount about the complex culture of the region. He became one of the most respected generals in Lebanon. His ended violently with his assassination in December 2007. Another officer, I shall call him Abu Hamudi, became an especially dear friend. I could always trust him to give me straight answers, and during dangerous times he demonstrated his willingness to risk his life to protect mine. Abu Hamudi died far too young—from a relentless disease—in 2004. He was a man of moderate views who, while very proud of being Lebanese, was also openly frustrated by Lebanon’s sometimes stultifying, and too often corrupt, political system. I don’t expect that Abu Hamudi would have agreed with every word in this little book, but I would like to think that he would find this an honest account of the leading Shi‘i political party in Lebanon—Hezbollah.

Over the course of many visits to Lebanon, I have benefited from hundreds of conversations with other Lebanese colleagues, friends, intellectuals, journalists, and business people. Here I wish simply to acknowledge a general debt, and to promise that I will find more private occasions to extend my gratitude.

I would like to note that substantial parts of [chapter 3](#) were first published as “Ritual, Blood, and Shiite Identity,” *Drama Review* 49, no. 4 (Winter 2005), and are used here with permission. Also, some parts of [chapters 1](#) and [2](#) have appeared, in rather different form, in *Hizballah of Lebanon: From Radical Idealism to Mundane Politics* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1999), and in “Hizballah: From Radicalism to Pragmatism,” *Middle East Policy* 5, no. 4 (January 1998); material from both sources are used here with permission. The Hezbollah “Open Letter,” discussed in [chapter 2](#), was first published in English in my own *Amal and the Shi‘a: Struggle for the Soul of Lebanon* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987).

I am deeply grateful to Lynn Worth for her perceptive, thorough, and lucid copyediting of this edition. This is a better book for her efforts. Tobiah Waldron prepared a comprehensive, even perceptive, index, which I am confident readers will find unusually useful. The extraordinary efforts of the Princeton University Press team may not pass unheralded.

Finally, I must thank DLN and ATN for making my *dunya* complete.

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